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THE JOYOUS ADVENTURES OF ARISTIDE PUJOL

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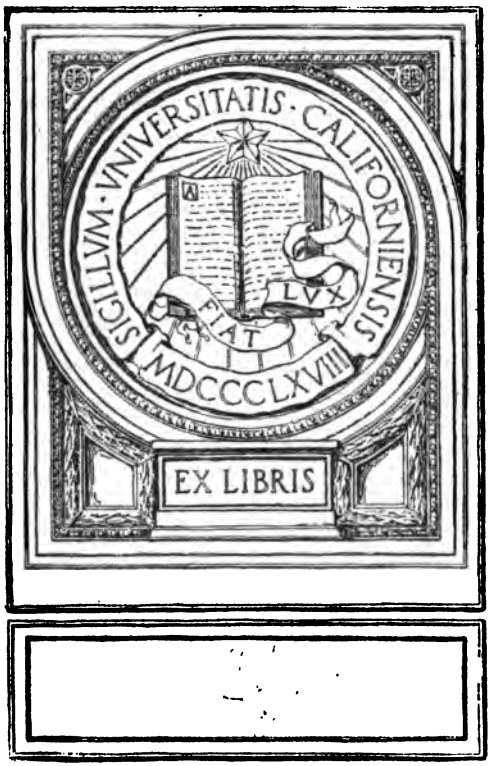
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THE JOYOUS ADVENTURES OF ARISTIDE PUJOL

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THE DEMAGOGUE AND LADY PHAYRE
THE GLORY OF CLEMENTINA

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AT THE BEGINNING OF THE FOURTH KISS OUT CAME HER FATHER

See page 34

THE JOYOUS ADVENTURES OF ARISTIDE PUJOL

BY

WILLIAM J. LOCKE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY

ALEC BALL

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THE
JOYOUS ADVENTURES
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The Joyous Adventures of Aristide Pujol

I

THE ADVENTURE OF THE FAIR PATRONNE

IN narrating these few episodes in the undulatory, not to say switchback, career of my friend Aristide Pujol, I can pretend to no chronological sequence. Some occurred before he (almost literally) crossed my path for the first time, some afterwards. They have been related to me haphazard at odd times, together with a hundred other incidents, just as a chance tag of association recalled them to his swift and picturesque memory. He would, indeed, make a show of fixing dates by reference to his temporary profession; but so Protean seem to have been his changes of fortune in their number and rapidity that I could never keep count of them or their order. Nor does it matter. The man's life was as disconnected as a pack of cards.

My first meeting with him happened in this wise.

I had been motoring in a listless, solitary fashion about Languedoc. A friend who had stolen a few days from anxious business in order to accompany me from Boulogne through Touraine and Guienne had left me at Toulouse; another friend whom I had arranged to pick up at Avignon on his way from Monte Carlo was unexpectedly delayed. I was therefore condemned to a period of solitude somewhat irksome to a man of a gregarious temperament. At first, for company's sake, I sat in front by my chauffeur, McKeogh. But McKeogh, an atheistical Scotch mechanic with his soul in his cylinders, being as communicative as his own differential, I soon relapsed into the equal loneliness and greater comfort of the back.

In this fashion I left Montpellier one morning on my leisurely eastward journey, deciding to break off from the main road, striking due south, and visit Aigues-Mortes on the way.

Aigues-Mortes was once a flourishing Mediterranean town. St. Louis and his Crusaders sailed thence twice for Palestine; Charles V. and Francis I. met there and filled the place with glittering state. But now its glory has departed. The sea has receded three or four miles, and left it high and dry in the middle of bleak salt marshes, useless, dead and desolate, swept by the howling mistral and scorched by the blazing sun. The straight

white ribbon of road which stretched for miles through the plain, between dreary vineyards—some under water, the black shoots of the vines appearing like symmetrical wreckage above the surface—was at last swallowed up by the grim central gateway of the town, surmounted by its frowning tower. On each side spread the brown machicolated battlements that vainly defended the death-stricken place. A soft northern atmosphere would have invested it in a certain mystery of romance, but in the clear southern air, the towers and walls standing sharply defined against the blue, wind-swept sky, it looked naked and pitiful, like a poor ghost caught in the daylight.

At some distance from the gate appeared the usual notice as to speed-limit. McKeogh, most scrupulous of drivers, obeyed. As there was a knot of idlers underneath and beyond the gate he slowed down to a crawl, sounding a patient and monotonous horn. We advanced; the peasant folk cleared the way sullenly and suspiciously. Then, deliberately, an elderly man started to cross the road, and on the sound of the horn stood stock still, with resentful defiance on his weather-beaten face. McKeogh jammed on the brakes. The car halted. But the infinitesimal fraction of a second before it came to a dead stop the wing over the near front wheel touched the elderly person and down he went on the ground. I leaped from the car, to be in-

stantly surrounded by an infuriated crowd, which seemed to gather from all the quarters of the broad, decaying square. The elderly man, helped to his feet by sympathetic hands, shook his knotted fists in my face. He was a dour and ugly peasant, of splendid physique, as hard and discoloured as the walls of Aigues-Mortes; his cunning eyes were as clear as a boy's, his lined, clean-shaven face as rigid as a gargoyle; and the back of his neck, above the low collar of his jersey, showed itself seamed into glazed irregular lozenges, like the hide of a crocodile. He cursed me and my kind healthily in very bad French and apostrophized his friends in Provençal, who in Provençal and bad French made responsive clamour. I had knocked him down on purpose. He was crippled for life. Who was I to go tearing through peaceful towns with my execrated locomotive and massacring innocent people? I tried to explain that the fault was his, and that, after all, to judge by the strength of his lungs, no great damage had been inflicted. But no. They would not let it go like that. There were the gendarmes—I looked across the square and saw two gendarmes striding portentously towards the scene—they would see justice done. The law was there to protect poor folk. For a certainty I would not get off easily.

I knew what would happen. The gendarmes would submit McKeogh and myself to a *procès-*

I HAD KNOCKED HIM DOWN ON PURPOSE. HE WAS CRIPPLED FOR LIFE

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verbal. They would impound the car. I should have to go to the Mairie and make endless depositions. I should have to wait, Heaven knows how long, before I could appear before the *juge de paix.* I should have to find a solicitor to represent me. In the end I should be fined for furious driving—at the rate, when the accident happened, of a mile an hour—and probably have to pay a heavy compensation to the wilful and uninjured victim of McKeogh's impeccable driving. And all the time, while waiting for injustice to take its course, I should be the guest of a hostile population. I grew angry. The crowd grew angrier. The gendarmes approached with an air of majesty and fate. But just before they could be acquainted with the brutal facts of the disaster a singularly bright-eyed man, wearing a hard felt hat and a blue serge suit, flashed like a meteor into the midst of the throng, glanced with an amazing swiftness at me, the car, the crowd, the gendarmes and the victim, ran his hands up and down the person of the last mentioned, and then, with a frenzied action of a figure in a bad cinematograph rather than that of a human being, subjected the inhabitants to an infuriated philippic in Provençal, of which I could not understand one word. The crowd, with here and there a murmur of remonstrance, listened to him in silence. When he had finished they hung their heads, the gendarmes shrugged their majestic

and fateful shoulders and lit cigarettes, and the gargoyle-visaged ancient with the neck of crocodile hide turned grumbling away. I have never witnessed anything so magical as the effect produced by this electric personage. Even McKeogh, who during the previous clamour had sat stiff behind his wheel, keeping expressionless eyes fixed on the cap of the radiator, turned his head two degrees of a circle and glanced at his surroundings.

The instant peace was established our rescuer darted up to me with the directness of a dragon-fly and shook me warmly by the hand. As he had done me a service, I responded with a grateful smile; besides, his aspect was peculiarly prepossessing. I guessed him to be about five-and-thirty. He had a clear olive complexion, black moustache and short silky vandyke beard, and the most fascinating, the most humorous, the most mocking, the most astonishingly bright eyes I have ever seen in my life. I murmured a few expressions of thanks, while he prolonged the handshake with the fervour of a long-lost friend.

"It's all right, my dear sir. Don't worry any more," he said in excellent English, but with a French accent curiously tinged with Cockney. "The old gentleman's as sound as a bell—not a bruise on his body." He pushed me gently to the step of the car. "Get in and let me guide you to the only place where you can eat in this accursed town."

Before I could recover from my surprise, he was by my side in the car shouting directions to McKeogh.

"Ah! These people!" he cried, shaking his hands with outspread fingers in front of him. "They have no manners, no decency, no self-respect. It's a regular trade. They go and get knocked down by automobiles on purpose, so that they can claim indemnity. They breed dogs especially and train them to commit suicide under the wheels so that they can get compensation. There's one now—*ah, sacrée bête!*" He leaned over the side of the car and exchanged violent objurgation with the dog. "But never mind. So long as I am here you can run over anything you like with impunity."

"I'm very much obliged to you," said I. "You've saved me from a deal of foolish unpleasantness. From the way you handled the old gentleman I should guess you to be a doctor."

"That's one of the few things I've never been," he replied. "No; I'm not a doctor. One of these days I'll tell you all about myself." He spoke as if our sudden acquaintance would ripen into life-long friendship. "There's the hotel—the Hôtel Saint-Louis," he pointed to the sign a little way up the narrow, old-world, cobble-paved street we were entering. "Leave it to me; I'll see that they treat you properly."

The car drew up at the doorway. My electric

friend leaped out and met the emerging landlady.

"*Bonjour, madame.* I've brought you one of my very good friends, an English gentleman of the most high importance. He will have *déjeuner—tout ce qu'il y a de mieux.* None of your cabbage-soup and eels and *andouilles,* but a good omelette, some fresh fish, and a bit of very tender meat. Will that suit you?" he asked, turning to me.

"Excellently," said I, smiling. "And since you've ordered me so charming a *déjeuner,* perhaps you'll do me the honour of helping me to eat it?"

"With the very greatest pleasure," said he, without a second's hesitation.

We entered the small, stuffy dining-room, where a dingy waiter, with a dingier smile, showed us to a small table by the window. At the long table in the middle of the room sat the half-dozen frequenters of the house, their napkins tucked under their chins, eating in gloomy silence a dreary meal of the kind my new friend had deprecated.

"What shall we drink?" I asked, regarding with some disfavour the thin red and white wines in the decanters.

"Anything," said he, "but this *piquette du pays.* It tastes like a mixture of sea-water and vinegar. It produces the look of patient suffering that you see on those gentlemen's faces. You, who are not used to it, had better not venture. It would excoriate your throat. It would dislocate your pan-

creas. It would play the very devil with you. Adolphe"—he beckoned the waiter—"there's a little white wine of the Côtes du Rhone——" He glanced at me.

"I'm in your hands," said I.

As far as eating and drinking went I could not have been in better. Nor could anyone desire a more entertaining chance companion of travel. That he had thrust himself upon me in the most brazen manner and taken complete possession of me there could be no doubt. But it had all been done in the most irresistibly charming manner in the world. One entirely forgot the impudence of the fellow. I have since discovered that he did not lay himself out to be agreeable. The flow of talk and anecdote, the bright laughter that lit up a little joke, making it appear a very brilliant joke indeed, were all spontaneous. He was a man, too, of some cultivation. He knew France thoroughly, England pretty well; he had a discriminating taste in architecture, and waxed poetical over the beauties of Nature.

"It strikes me as odd," said I at last, somewhat ironically, "that so vital a person as yourself should find scope for your energies in this dead-and-alive place."

He threw up his hands. "I live here? I crumble and decay in Aigues-Mortes? For whom do you take me?"

I replied that, not having the pleasure of knowing his name and quality, I could only take him for an enigma.

He selected a card from his letter-case and handed it to me across the table. It bore the legend:—

ARISTIDE PUJOL,
Agent.
213bis, Rue Saint-Honoré, Paris.

"That address will always find me," he said.

Civility bade me give him my card, which he put carefully in his letter-case.

"I owe my success in life," said he, "to the fact that I have never lost an opportunity or a visiting-card."

"Where did you learn your perfect English?" I asked.

"First," said he, "among English tourists at Marseilles. Then in England. I was Professor of French at an academy for young ladies."

"I hope you were a success?" said I.

He regarded me drolly.

"Yes—and no," said he.

The meal over, we left the hotel.

"Now," said he, "you would like to visit the towers on the ramparts. I would dearly love to accompany you, but I have business in the town.

I will take you, however, to the *gardien* and put you in his charge."

He raced me to the gate by which I had entered. The *gardien des remparts* issued from his lodge at Aristide Pujol's summons and listened respectfully to his exhortation in Provençal. Then he went for his keys.

"I'll not say good-bye," Aristide Pujol declared, amiably. "I'll get through my business long before you've done your sight-seeing, and you'll find me waiting for you near the hotel. *Au revoir, cher ami.*"

He smiled, lifted his hat, waved his hand in a friendly way, and darted off across the square. The old *gardien* came out with the keys and took me off to the Tour de Constance, where Protestants were imprisoned pell-mell after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes; thence to the Tour des Bourguignons, where I forget how many hundred Burgundians were massacred and pickled in salt; and, after these cheery exhibitions, invited me to walk round the ramparts and inspect the remaining eighteen towers of the enceinte. As the mistral, however, had sprung up and was shuddering across the high walls, I declined, and, having paid him his fee, descended to the comparative shelter of the earth.

There I found Aristide Pujol awaiting me at the corner of the narrow street in which the hotel was

situated. He was wearing—like most of the young bloods of Provence in winter-time—a short, shaggy, yet natty goatskin coat, ornamented with enormous bone buttons, and a little cane valise stood near by on the kerb of the square.

He was not alone. Walking arm in arm with him was a stout, elderly woman of swarthy complexion and forbidding aspect. She was attired in a peasant's or small shopkeeper's rusty Sunday black and an old-fashioned black bonnet prodigiously adorned with black plumes and black roses. Beneath this bonnet her hair was tightly drawn up from her forehead; heavy eyebrows overhung a pair of small, crafty eyes, and a tuft of hair grew on the corner of a prognathous jaw. She might have been about seven-and-forty.

Aristide Pujol, unlinking himself from this unattractive female, advanced and saluted me with considerable deference.

"Monseigneur——" said he.

As I am neither a duke nor an archbishop, but a humble member of the lower automobiling classes, the high-flown title startled me.

"Monseigneur, will you permit me," said he, in French, "to present to you Mme. Gougasse? Madame is the *patronne* of the Café de l'Univers, at Carcassonne, which doubtless you have frequented, and she is going to do me the honour of marrying me to-morrow."

ANYTHING LESS CONGRUOUS AS THE BRIDE-ELECT OF THE DEBONAIR ARISTIDE PUJOL IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO IMAGINE

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The unexpectedness of the announcement took my breath away.

"Good heavens!" said I, in a whisper.

Anyone less congruous as the bride-elect of the debonair Aristide Pujol it was impossible to imagine. However, it was none of my business. I raised my hat politely to the lady.

"Madame, I offer you my sincere felicitations. As an entertaining husband I am sure you will find M. Aristide Pujol without a rival."

"*Je vous remercie, monseigneur,*" she replied, in what was obviously her best company manner. "And if ever you will deign to come again to the Café de l'Univers at Carcassonne we will esteem it a great honour."

"And so you're going to get married to-morrow?" I remarked, by way of saying something. To congratulate Aristide Pujol on his choice lay beyond my power of hypocrisy.

"To-morrow," said he, "my dear Amélie will make me the happiest of men."

"We start for Carcassonne by the three-thirty train," said Mme. Gougasse, pulling a great silver watch from some fold of her person.

"Then there is time," said I, pointing to a little weather-beaten café in the square, "to drink a glass to your happiness.'

"*Bien volontiers,*" said the lady.

"*Pardon, chère amie,*" Aristide interposed,

quickly. "Unless monseigneur and I start at once for Montpellier, I shall not have time to transact my little affairs before your train arrives there."

Parenthetically, I must remark that all trains going from Aigues-Mortes to Carcassonne must stop at Montpellier.

"That's true," she agreed, in a hesitating manner. "But——"

"But, idol of my heart, though I am overcome with grief at the idea of leaving you for two little hours, it is a question of four thousand francs. Four thousand francs are not picked up every day in the street. It's a lot of money."

Mme. Gougasse's little eyes glittered.

"*Bien sûr.* And it's quite settled?"

"Absolutely."

"And it will be all for me?"

"Half," said Aristide.

"You promised all to me for the redecoration of the ceiling of the café."

"Three thousand will be sufficient, dear angel. What? I know these contractors and decorators. The more you pay them, the more abominable will they make the ceiling. Leave it to me. I, Aristide, will guarantee you a ceiling like that of the Sistine Chapel for two thousand francs."

She smiled and bridled, so as to appear perfectly well-bred in my presence. The act of smiling

caused the tuft of hair on her jaw to twitch horribly. A cold shiver ran down my back.

"Don't you think, monseigneur," she asked, archly, "that M. Pujol should give me the four thousand francs as a wedding-present?"

"Most certainly," said I, in my heartiest voice, entirely mystified by the conversation.

"Well, I yield," said Aristide. "Ah, women, women! They hold up their little rosy finger, and the bravest of men has to lie down with his chin on his paws like a good old watch-dog. You agree, then, monseigneur, to my giving the whole of the four thousand francs to Amélie?"

"More than that," said I, convinced that the swarthy lady of the prognathous jaw was bound to have her own way in the end where money was concerned, and yet for the life of me not seeing how I had anything to do with the disposal of Aristide Pujol's property—"More than that," said I; "I command you to do it."

"*C'est bien gentil de votre part,*" said madame.

"And now the café," I suggested, with chattering teeth. We had been standing all the time at the corner of the square, while the mistral whistled down the narrow street. The dust was driven stingingly into our faces, and the women of the place who passed us by held their black scarves over their mouths.

"Alas, monseigneur," said Mme. Gougasse,

"Aristide is right. You must start now for Montpellier in the automobile. I will go by the train for Carcassonne at three-thirty. It is the only train from Aigues-Mortes. Aristide transacts his business and joins me in the train at Montpellier. You have not much time to spare."

I was bewildered. I turned to Aristide Pujol, who stood, hands on hips, regarding his prospective bride and myself with humorous benevolence.

"My good friend," said I in English, "I've not the remotest idea of what the two of you are talking about; but I gather you have arranged that I should motor you to Montpellier. Now, I'm not going to Montpellier. I've just come from there, as I told you at *déjeuner*. I'm going in the opposite direction."

He took me familiarly by the arm, and, with a *"Pardon, chère amie,"* to the lady, led me a few paces aside.

"I beseech you," he whispered; "it's a matter of four thousand francs, a hundred and sixty pounds, eight hundred dollars, a new ceiling for the Café de l'Univers, the dream of a woman's life, and the happiest omen for my wedded felicity. The fair goddess Hymen invites you with uplifted torch. You can't refuse."

He hypnotized me with his bright eyes, overpowered my will by his winning personality. He seemed to force me to desire his companionship. I

weakened. After all, I reflected, I was at a loose end, and where I went did not matter to anybody. Aristide Pujol had also done me a considerable service, for which I felt grateful. I yielded with good grace.

He darted back to Mme. Gougasse, alive with gaiety.

"*Chère amie,* if you were to press monseigneur, I'm sure he would come to Carcassonne and dance at our wedding."

"Alas! That," said I, hastily, "is out of the question. But," I added, amused by a humorous idea, "why should two lovers separate even for a few hours? Why should not madame accompany us to Montpellier? There is room in my auto for three, and it would give me the opportunity of making madame's better acquaintance."

"There, Amélie!" cried Aristide "What do you say?"

"Truly, it is too much honour," murmured Mme. Gougasse, evidently tempted.

"There's your luggage, however," said Aristide. "You would bring that great trunk, for which there is no place in the automobile of monseigneur."

"That's true—my luggage."

"Send it on by train, *chère amie.*"

"When will it arrive at Carcassonne?"

"Not to-morrow," said Pujol, "but perhaps next week or the week after. Perhaps it may never come

at all. One is never certain with these railway companies. But what does that matter?"

"What do you say?" cried the lady, sharply.

"It may arrive or it may not arrive; but you are rich enough, *chère amie,* not to think of a few camisoles and bits of jewellery."

"And my lace and my silk dress that I have brought to show your parents. *Merci!*" she retorted, with a dangerous spark in her little eyes. "You think one is made of money, eh? You will soon find yourself mistaken, my friend. I would give you to understand——" She checked herself suddenly. "Monseigneur"—she turned to me with a resumption of the gracious manner of her bottle-decked counter at the Café de l'Univers—"you are too amiable. I appreciate your offer infinitely; but I am not going to entrust my luggage to the kind care of the railway company. *Merci, non.* They are robbers and thieves. Even if it did arrive, half the things would be stolen. Oh, I know them."

She shook the head of an experienced and self-reliant woman. No doubt, distrustful of banks as of railway companies, she kept her money hidden in her bedroom. I pitied my poor young friend; he would need all his gaiety to enliven the domestic side of the Café de l'Univers.

The lady having declined my invitation, I expressed my regrets; and Aristide, more emotional,

voiced his sense of heart-rent desolation, and in a resigned tone informed me that it was time to start. I left the lovers and went to the hotel, where I paid the bill, summoned McKeogh, and lit a companionable pipe.

The car backed down the narow street into the square and took up its position. We entered. McKeogh took charge of Aristide's valise, tucked us up in the rug, and settled himself in his seat. The car started and we drove off, Aristide gallantly brandishing his hat and Mme. Gougasse waving her lily hand, which happened to be hidden in an ill-fitting black glove.

"To Montpellier, as fast as you can!" he shouted at the top of his lungs to McKeogh. Then he sighed as he threw himself luxuriously back. "Ah, this is better than a train. Amélie doesn't know what a mistake she has made!"

The elderly victim of my furious entry was lounging, in spite of the mistral, by the grim machicolated gateway. Instead of scowling at me he raised his hat respectfully as we passed. I touched my cap, but Aristide returned the salute with the grave politeness of royalty.

"This is a place," said he, "which I would like never to behold again."

In a few moments we were whirling along the straight, white road between the interminable black vineyards, and past the dilapidated homesteads of

the vine-folk and wayside cafés that are scattered about this unjoyous corner of France.

"Well," said he, suddenly, "what do you think of my *fiancée?*"

Politeness and good taste forbade expression of my real opinion. I murmured platitudes to the effect that she seemed to be a most sensible woman, with a head for business.

"She's not what we in French call *jolie, jolie;* but what of that? What's the good of marrying a pretty face for other men to make love to? And, as you English say, there's none of your confounded sentiment about her. But she has the most flourishing café in Carcassonne; and, when the ceiling is newly decorated, provided she doesn't insist on too much gold leaf and too many naked babies on clouds—it's astonishing how women love naked babies on clouds—it will be the snuggest place in the world. May I ask for one of your excellent cigarettes?"

I handed him the case from the pocket of the car.

"It was there that I made her acquaintance," he resumed, after having lit the cigarette from my pipe. "We met, we talked, we fixed it up. She is not the woman to go by four roads to a thing. She did me the honour of going straight for me. Ah, but what a wonderful woman! She rules that café like a kingdom; a Semiramis, a Queen Elizabeth,

a Catherine de' Medici. She sits enthroned behind the counter all day long and takes the money and counts the saucers and smiles on rich clients, and if a waiter in a far corner gives a bit of sugar to a dog she spots it, and the waiter has a deuce of a time. That woman is worth her weight in thousand-franc notes. She goes to bed every night at one, and gets up in the morning at five. And virtuous! Didn't Solomon say that a virtuous woman was more precious than rubies? That's the kind of wife the wise man chooses when he gives up the giddy ways of youth. Ah, my dear sir, over and over again these last two or three days my dear old parents—I have been on a visit to them in Aigues-Mortes—have commended my wisdom. Amélie, who is devoted to me, left her café in Carcassonne to make their acquaintance and receive their blessing before our marriage, also to show them the lace on her *dessous* and her new silk dress. They are too old to take the long journey to Carcassonne. 'My son,' they said, 'you are making a marriage after our own hearts. We are proud of you. Now we can die perfectly content.' I was wrong, perhaps, in saying that Amélie has no sentiment," he continued, after a short pause. "She adores me. It is evident. She will not allow me out of her sight. Ah, my dear friend, you don't know what a happy man I am."

For a brilliant young man of five-and-thirty, who

was about to marry a horrible Megæra ten or twelve years his senior, he looked unhealthily happy. There was no doubt that his handsome roguery had caught the woman's fancy. She was at the dangerous age, when even the most ferro-concrete-natured of women are apt to run riot. She was comprehensible, and pardonable. But the man baffled me. He was obviously marrying her for her money; but how in the name of Diogenes and all the cynics could he manage to look so confoundedly joyful about it?

The mistral blew bitterly. I snuggled beneath the rug and hunched up my shoulders so as to get my ears protected by my coat-collar. Aristide, sufficiently protected by his goat's hide, talked like a shepherd on a May morning. Why he took for granted my interest in his unromantic, not to say sordid, courtship I knew not; but he gave me the whole history of it from its modest beginnings to its now penultimate stage. From what I could make out—for the mistral whirled many of his words away over unheeding Provence—he had entered the Café de l'Univers one evening, a human derelict battered by buffeting waves of Fortune, and, finding a seat immediately beneath Mme. Gougasse's *comptoir,* had straightway poured his grievances into a feminine ear and, figuratively speaking, rested his weary heart upon a feminine bosom. And his buffetings and grievances and weari-

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HAD STRAIGHTWAY POURED HIS GRIEVANCES INTO A FEMININE EAR

DO NOT
REMOVE

nesses? Whence came they? I asked the question point-blank.

"Ah, my dear friend," he answered, kissing his gloved finger-tips, "she was adorable!"

"Who?" I asked, taken aback. "Mme. Gougasse?"

"*Mon Dieu,* no!" he replied. "Not Mme. Gougasse. Amélie is solid, she is virtuous, she is jealous, she is capacious; but I should not call her adorable. No; the adorable one was twenty—delicious and English; a peach-blossom, a zephyr, a summer night's dream, and the most provoking little witch you ever saw in your life. Her father and herself and six of her compatriots were touring through France. They had circular tickets. So had I. In fact, I was a miniature Thomas Cook and Son to the party. I provided them with the discomforts of travel and supplied erroneous information. *Que voulez-vous?* If people ask you for the history of a pair of Louis XV. corsets, in a museum glass case, it's much better to stimulate their imagination by saying that they were worn by Joan of Arc at the Battle of Agincourt than to dull their minds by your ignorance. *Eh bien,* we go through the châteaux of the Loire, through Poitiers and Angoulême, and we come to Carcassonne. You know Carcassonne? The great grim *cité,* with its battlements and bastions and barbicans and fifty towers on the hill looking over the rubbishy modern

town? We were there. The rest of the party were buying picture postcards of the *gardien* at the foot of the Tour de l'Inquisition. The man who invented picture postcards ought to have his statue on the top of the Eiffel Tower. The millions of headaches he has saved! People go to places now not to exhaust themselves by seeing them, but to buy picture postcards of them. The rest of the party, as I said, were deep in picture postcards. Mademoiselle and I promenaded outside. We often promenaded outside when the others were buying picture postcards," he remarked, with an extra twinkle in his bright eyes. "And the result? Was it my fault? We leaned over the parapet. The wind blew a confounded *mèche*—what do you call it——?"

"Strand?"

"Yes—strand of her hair across her face. She let it blow and laughed and did not move. Didn't I say she was a little witch? If there's a Provençal ever born who would not have kissed a girl under such provocation I should like to have his mummy. I kissed her. She kept on laughing. I kissed her again. I kissed her four times. At the beginning of the fourth kiss out came her father from the postcard shop. He waited till the end of it and then announced himself. He announced himself in such ungentlemanly terms that I was forced to let the whole party, including the adorable little witch, go

on to Pau by themselves, while I betook my broken heart to the Café de l'Univers."

"And there you found consolation?"

"I told my sad tale. Amélie listened and called the manager to take charge of the *comptoir,* and poured herself out a glass of Frontignan. Amélie always drinks Frontignan when her heart is touched. I came the next day and the next. It was pouring with rain day and night—and Carcassonne in rain is like Hades with its furnaces put out by human tears—and the Café de l'Univers like a little warm corner of Paradise stuck in the midst of it."

"And so that's how it happened?"

"That's how it happened. *Ma foi!* When a lady asks a *galant homme* to marry her, what is he to do? Besides, did I not say that the Café de l'Univers was the most prosperous one in Carcassonne? I'm afraid you English, my dear friend, have such sentimental ideas about marriage. Now, we in France ——*Attendez, attendez!*" He suddenly broke off his story, lurched forward, and gripped the back of the front seat.

"To the right, man, to the right!" he cried excitedly to McKeogh.

We had reached the point where the straight road from Aigues-Mortes branches into a fork, one road going to Montpellier, the other to Nîmes. Montpellier being to the west, McKeogh had naturally taken the left fork.

"To the right!" shouted Aristide.

McKeogh pulled up and turned his head with a look of protesting inquiry. I intervened with a laugh.

"You're wrong in your geography, M. Pujol. Besides, there is the signpost staring you in the face. This is the way to Montpellier."

"But, my dear, heaven-sent friend, I no more want to go to Montpellier than you do!" he cried. "Montpellier is the last place on earth I desire to visit. You want to go to Nîmes, and so do I. To the right, chauffeur."

"What shall I do, sir?" asked McKeogh.

I was utterly bewildered. I turned to the goat-skin-clad, pointed-bearded, bright-eyed Aristide, who, sitting bolt upright in the car, with his hands stretched out, looked like a parody of the god Pan in a hard felt hat.

"You don't want to go to Montpellier?" I asked, stupidly.

"No—ten thousand times no; not for a king's ransom."

"But your four thousand francs—your meeting Mme. Gougasse's train—your getting on to Carcassonne?"

"If I could put twenty million continents between myself and Carcassonne I'd do it," he explained, with frantic gestures. "Don't you understand? The good Lord who is always on my side

sent you especially to deliver me out of the hands of that unspeakable Xantippe. There are no four thousand francs. I'm not going to meet her train at Montpellier, and if she marries anyone to-morrow at Carcassonne it will not be Aristide Pujol."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"We'll go to Nimes."

"Very good, sir," said McKeogh.

"And now," said I, as soon as we had started on the right-hand road, "will you have the kindness to explain?"

"There's nothing to explain," he cried, gleefully. "Here am I delivered. I am free. I can breathe God's good air again. I'm not going to marry Yum-Yum, Yum-Yum. I feel ten years younger. Oh, I've had a narrow escape. But that's the way with me. I always fall on my feet. Didn't I tell you I've never lost an opportunity? The moment I saw an Englishman in difficulties, I realized my opportunity of being delivered out of the House of Bondage. I took it, and here I am! For two days I had been racking my brains for a means of getting out of Aigues-Mortes, when suddenly you—a *Deus ex machina*—a veritable god out of the machine—come to my aid. Don't say there isn't a Providence watching over me."

I suggested that his mode of escape seemed somewhat elaborate and fantastic. Why couldn't he have slipped quietly round to the railway station

and taken a ticket to any haven of refuge he might have fancied?

"For the simple reason," said he, with a gay laugh, "that I haven't a single penny piece in the world."

He looked so prosperous and untroubled that I stared incredulously.

"Not one tiny bronze sou," said he.

"You seem to take it pretty philosophically," said I.

"*Les gueux, les gueux, sont des gens heureux,*" he quoted.

"You're the first person who has made me believe in the happiness of beggars."

"In time I shall make you believe in lots of things," he retorted. "No. I hadn't one sou to buy a ticket, and Amélie never left me. I spent my last franc on the journey from Carcassonne to Aigues-Mortes. Amélie insisted on accompanying me. She was taking no chances. Her eyes never left me from the time we started. When I ran to your assistance she was watching me from a house on the other side of the *place*. She came to the hotel while we were lunching. I thought I would slip away unnoticed and join you after you had made the *tour des remparts*. But no. I must present her to my English friend. And then—*voyons* —didn't I tell you I never lost a visiting-card? Look at this?"

He dived into his pocket, produced the letter-case, and extracted a card.

"*Voilà.*"

I read: "The Duke of Wiltshire."

"But, good heavens, man," I cried, "that's not the card I gave you."

"I know it isn't," said he; "but it's the one I showed to Amélie."

"How on earth," I asked, "did you come by the Duke of Wiltshire's visiting-card?"

He looked at me roguishly.

"I am—what do you call it?—a—a 'snapper up of unconsidered trifles.' You see I know my Shakespeare. I read 'The Winter's Tale' with some French pupils to whom I was teaching English. I love Autolycus. *C'est un peu moi, hein?* Anyhow, I showed the Duke's card to Amélie."

I began to understand. "That was why you called me 'monseigneur'?"

"Naturally. And I told her that you were my English patron, and would give me four thousand francs as a wedding present if I accompanied you to your agent's at Montpellier, where you could draw the money. Ah! But she was suspicious! Yesterday I borrowed a bicycle. A friend left it in the courtyard. I thought, 'I will creep out at dead of night, when everyone's asleep, and once on my *petite bicyclette, bonsoir la compagnie.*' But, would you believe it? When I had dressed and

crept down, and tried to mount the bicycle, I found both tyres had been punctured in a hundred places with the point of a pair of scissors. What do you think of that, eh? Ah, *là, là!* it has been a narrow escape. When you invited her to accompany us to Montpellier my heart was in my mouth."

"It would have served you right," I said, "if she had accepted."

He laughed as though, instead of not having a penny, he had not a care in the world. Accustomed to the geometrical conduct of my well-fed fellow-Britons, who map out their lives by rule and line, I had no measure whereby to gauge this amazing and inconsequential person. In one way he had acted abominably. To leave an affianced bride in the lurch in this heartless manner was a most ungentlemanly proceeding. On the other hand, an unscrupulous adventurer would have married the woman for her money and chanced the consequences. In the tussle between Perseus and the Gorgon the odds are all in favour of Perseus. Mercury and Minerva, the most sharp-witted of the gods, are helping him all the time—to say nothing of the fact that Perseus starts out by being a notoriously handsome fellow. So a handsome rogue can generally wheedle an elderly, ugly wife into opening her money-bags, and, if successful, leads the enviable life of a fighting-cock. It was very

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"I FOUND BOTH TYRES HAD BEEN PUNCTURED IN A HUNDRED PLACES"

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much to his credit that this kind of life was not to the liking of Aristide Pujol.

Indeed, speaking from affectionate knowledge of the man, I can declare that the position in which he, like many a better man, had placed himself was intolerable. Other men of equal sensitiveness would have extricated themselves in a more common-place fashion; but the dramatic appealed to my rascal, and he has often plumed himself on his calculated *coup de théâtre* at the fork of the roads. He was delighted with it. Even now I sometimes think that Aristide Pujol will never grow up.

"There's one thing I don't understand," said I, "and that is your astonishing influence over the populace at Aigues-Mortes. You came upon them like a firework—a devil-among-the-tailors—and everybody, gendarmes and victim included, became as tame as sheep. How was it?"

He laughed. "I said you were my very old and dear friend and patron, a great English duke."

"I don't quite see how that explanation satisfied the pig-headed old gentleman whom I knocked down."

"Oh, that," said Aristide Pujol, with a look of indescribable drollery—"that was my old father."

II

THE ADVENTURE OF THE ARLÉSIENNE

ARISTIDE PUJOL bade me a sunny farewell at the door of the Hôtel du Luxembourg at Nîmes, and, valise in hand, darted off, in his impetuous fashion, across the Place de l'Esplanade. I felt something like a pang at the sight of his retreating figure, as, on his own confession, he had not a penny in the world. I wondered what he would do for food and lodging, to say nothing of tobacco, *apéritifs,* and other such necessaries of life. The idea of so gay a creature starving was abhorrent. Yet an invitation to stay as my guest at the hotel until he saw an opportunity of improving his financial situation he had courteously declined.

Early next morning I found him awaiting me in the lounge and smoking an excellent cigar. He explained that so dear a friend as myself ought to be the first to hear the glad tidings. Last evening, by the grace of Heaven, he had run across a bare acquaintance, a manufacturer of nougat at Montélimar; had spent several hours in his company, with the result that he had convinced him of two things:

first, that the dry, crumbling, shortbread-like nougat of Montélimar was unknown in England, where the population subsisted on a sickly, glutinous mess whereto the medical faculty had ascribed the prevalent dyspepsia of the population; and, secondly, that the one Heaven-certified apostle who could spread the glorious gospel of Montélimar nougat over the length and breadth of Great Britain and Ireland was himself, Aristide Pujol. A handsome salary had been arranged, of which he had already drawn something on account—*hinc ille Colorado*—and he was to accompany his principal the next day to Montélimar, *en route* for the conquest of Britain. In the meantime he was as free as the winds, and would devote the day to showing me the wonders of the town.

I congratulated him on his almost fantastic good fortune and gladly accepted his offer.

"There is one thing I should like to ask you," said I, "and it is this. Yesterday afternoon you refused my cordially-offered hospitality, and went away without a sou to bless yourself with. What did you do? I ask out of curiosity. How does a man set about trying to subsist on nothing at all?"

"It's very simple," he replied. "Haven't I told you, and haven't you seen for yourself, that I never lose an opportunity? More than that. It has been my rule in life either to make friends with the Mammon of Unrighteousness—he's a muddle-

headed ass is Mammon, and you can steer clear of his unrighteousness if you're sharp enough—or else to cast my bread upon the waters in the certainty of finding it again after many days. In the case in question I took the latter course. I cast my bread a year or two ago upon the waters of the Roman baths, which I will have the pleasure of showing you this morning, and I found it again last night at the Hôtel de la Curatterie."

In the course of the day he related to me the following artless history.

Aristide Pujol arrived at Nîmes one blazing day in July. He had money in his pocket and laughter in his soul. He had also deposited his valise at the Hôtel du Luxembourg, which, as all the world knows, is the most luxurious hotel in the town. Joyousness of heart impelled him to a course of action which the good Nîmois regard as maniacal in the sweltering July heat—he walked about the baking streets for his own good pleasure.

Aristide Pujol was floating a company, a process which afforded him as much delirious joy as the floating, for the first time, of a toy yacht affords a child. It was a company to build an hotel in Perpignan, where the recent demolition of the fortifications erected by the Emperor Charles V. had set free a vast expanse of valuable building ground on the other side of the little river on which the old

town is situated. The best hotel in Perpignan being one to get away from as soon as possible, owing to restriction of site, Aristide conceived the idea of building a spacious and palatial hostelry in the new part of the town, which should allure all the motorists and tourists of the globe to that Pyrenean Paradise. By sheer audacity he had contrived to interest an eminent Paris architect in his project. Now the man who listened to Aristide Pujol was lost. With the glittering eye of the Ancient Mariner he combined the winning charm of a woman. For salvation, you either had to refuse to see him, as all the architects to the end of the R's in the alphabetical list had done, or put wax, Ulysses-like, in your ears, a precaution neglected by the eminent M. Say. M. Say went to Perpignan and returned in a state of subdued enthusiasm.

A limited company was formed, of which Aristide Pujol, man of vast experience in affairs, was managing director. But money came in slowly. A financier was needed. Aristide looked through his collection of visiting-cards, and therein discovered that of a deaf ironmaster at St. Étienne whose life he had once saved at a railway station by dragging him, as he was crossing the line, out of the way of an express train that came thundering through. Aristide, man of impulse, went straight to St. Étienne, to work upon the ironmaster's sense of

gratitude. Meanwhile, M. Say, man of more sober outlook, bethought him of a client, an American millionaire, passing through Paris, who had speculated considerably in hotels. The millionaire, having confidence in the eminent M. Say, thought well of the scheme. He was just off to Japan, but would drop down to the Pyrenees the next day and look at the Perpignan site before boarding his steamer at Marseilles. If his inquiries satisfied him, and he could arrange matters with the managing director, he would not mind putting a million dollars or so into the concern. You must kindly remember that I do not vouch for the literal accuracy of everything told me by Aristide Pujol.

The question of the all-important meeting between the millionaire and the managing director then arose. As Aristide was at St. Étienne it was arranged that they should meet at a half-way stage on the latter's journey from Perpignan to Marseilles. The Hôtel du Luxembourg at Nimes was the place, and two o'clock on Thursday the time appointed.

Meantime Aristide had found that the deaf ironmaster had died months ago. This was a disappointment, but fortune compensated him. This part of his adventure is somewhat vague, but I gathered that he was lured by a newly made acquaintance into a gambling den, where he won the prodigious sum of two thousand francs. With this

wealth jingling and crinkling in his pockets he fled the town and arrived at Nîmes on Wednesday morning, a day before his appointment.

That was why he walked joyously about the blazing streets. The tide had turned at last. Of the success of his interview with the millionaire he had not the slightest doubt. He walked about building gorgeous castles in Perpignan—which, by the way, is not very far from Spain. Besides, as you shall hear later, he had an account to settle with the town of Perpignan. At last he reached the Jardin de la Fontaine, the great, stately garden laid out in complexity of terrace and bridge and balustraded parapet over the waters of the old Roman baths by the master hand to which Louis XIV. had entrusted the Garden of Versailles.

Aristide threw himself on a bench and fanned himself with his straw hat.

"*Mon Dieu!* it's hot!" he remarked to another occupant of the seat.

This was a woman, and, as he saw when she turned her face towards him, an exceedingly handsome woman. Her white lawn and black silk headdress, coming to a tiny crown just covering the parting of her full, wavy hair, proclaimed her of the neighboring town of Arles. She had all the Arlésienne's Roman beauty—the finely chiselled features, the calm, straight brows, the ripe lips, the

soft oval contour, the clear olive complexion. She had also lustrous brown eyes; but these were full of tears. She only turned them on him for a moment; then she resumed her apparently interrupted occupation of sobbing. Aristide was a soft-hearted man. He drew nearer.

"Why, you're crying, madame!" said he.

"Evidently," murmured the lady.

"To cry scalding tears in this weather! It's too hot! Now, if you could only cry iced water there would be something refreshing in it."

"You jest, monsieur," said the lady, drying her eyes.

"By no means," said he. "The sight of so beautiful a woman in distress is painful."

"Ah!" she sighed. "I am very unhappy."

Aristide drew nearer still.

"Who," said he, "is the wretch that has dared to make you so?"

"My husband," replied the lady, swallowing a sob.

"The scoundrel!" said Aristide.

The lady shrugged her shoulders and looked down at her wedding-ring, which gleamed on a slim, brown, perfectly kept hand. Aristide prided himself on being a connoisseur in hands.

"There never was a husband yet," he added, "who appreciated a beautiful wife. Husbands only deserve harridans."

"That's true," said the Arlésienne, "for when the wife is good-looking they are jealous."

"Ah, that is the trouble, is it?" said Aristide. "Tell me all about it."

The beautiful Arlésienne again contemplated her slender fingers.

"I don't know you, monsieur."

"But you soon will," said Aristide, in his pleasant voice and with a laughing, challenging glance in his bright eyes. She met it swiftly and sidelong.

"Monsieur," she said, "I have been married to my husband for four years, and have always been faithful to him."

"That's praiseworthy," said Aristide.

"And I love him very much."

"That's unfortunate!" said Aristide.

"Unfortunate?"

"Evidently!" said Aristide.

Their eyes met. They burst out laughing. The lady quickly recovered and the tears sprang again.

"One can't jest with a heavy heart; and mine is very heavy." She broke down through self-pity. "Oh, I am ashamed!" she cried.

She turned away from him, burying her face in her hands. Her dress, cut low, showed the nape of her neck as it rose gracefully from her shoulders. Two little curls had rebelled against being drawn up with the rest of her hair. The back of a dainty ear, set close to the head, was provoking in its

pink loveliness. Her attitude, that of a youthful Niobe, all tears, but at the same time all curves and delicious contours, would have played the deuce with an anchorite.

Aristide, I would have you remember, was a child of the South. A child of the North, regarding a bewitching woman, thinks how nice it would be to make love to her, and wastes his time in wondering how he can do it. A child of the South neither thinks nor wonders; he makes love straight away.

"Madame," said Aristide, "you are adorable, and I love you to distraction."

She started up. "Monsieur, you forget yourself!"

"If I remember anything else in the wide world but you, it would be a poor compliment. I forget everything. You turn my head, you ravish my heart, and you put joy into my soul."

He meant it—intensely—for the moment.

"I ought not to listen to you," said the lady, "especially when I am so unhappy."

"All the more reason to seek consolation," replied Aristide.

"Monsieur," she said, after a short pause, "you look good and loyal. I will tell you what is the matter. My husband accuses me wrongfully, although I know that appearances are against me. He only allows me in the house on sufferance, and is taking measures to procure a divorce."

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"MADAME," SAID ARISTIDE, "YOU ARE ADORABLE, AND I LOVE YOU TO DISTRACTION"

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"*A la bonne heure!*" cried Aristide, excitedly casting away his straw hat, which an unintentional twist of the wrist caused to skim horizontally and nearly decapitate a small and perspiring soldier who happened to pass by. "*A la bonne heure!* Let him divorce you. You are then free. You can be mine without any further question."

"But I love my husband," she smiled, sadly.

"Bah!" said he, with the scepticism of the lover and the Provençal. "And, by the way, who is your husband?"

"He is M. Émile Bocardon, proprietor of the Hôtel de la Curatterie."

"And you?"

"I am Mme. Bocardon," she replied, with the faintest touch of roguery.

"But your Christian name? How is it possible for me to think of you as Mme. Bocardon?"

They argued the question. Eventually she confessed to the name of Zette.

Her confidence not stopping there, she told him how she came by the name; how she was brought up by her Aunt Léonie at Raphèle, some five miles from Arles, and many other unexciting particulars of her early years. Her baptismal name was Louise. Her mother, who died when she was young, called her Louisette. Aunt Léonie, a very busy woman, with no time for superfluous syllables, called her Zette.

"Zette!" He cast up his eyes as if she had been canonized and he was invoking her in rapt worship. "Zette, I adore you!"

Zette was extremely sorry. She, on her side, adored the cruel M. Bocardon. Incidentally she learned Aristide's name and quality. He was an *agent d'affaires,* extremely rich—had he not two thousand francs and an American millionaire in his pocket?

"M. Pujol," she said, "the earth holds but one thing that I desire, the love and trust of my husband."

"The good Bocardon is becoming tiresome," said Aristide.

Zette's lips parted, as she pointed to a black speck at the iron entrance gates.

"*Mon Dieu!* there he is!"

"He has become tiresome," said Aristide.

She rose, displaying to its full advantage her supple and stately figure. She had a queenly poise of the head. Aristide contemplated her with the frankest admiration.

"One would say Juno was walking the earth again."

Although Zette had never heard of Juno, and was as miserable and heavy hearted a woman as dwelt in Nîmes, a flush of pleasure rose to her cheeks. She too was a child of the South, and female children of the South love to be admired, no

matter how frankly. I have heard of Daughters of the Snows not quite averse to it. She sighed.

"I must go now, monsieur. He must not find me here with you. I am suffering enough already from his reproaches. Ah! it is unjust—unjust!" she cried, clenching her hands, while the tears again started into her eyes, and the corners of her pretty lips twitched with pain. "Indeed," she added, "I know it has been wrong of me to talk to you like this. But *que voulez-vous?* It was not my fault. Adieu, monsieur."

At the sight of her standing before him in her woeful beauty, Aristide's pulses throbbed.

"It is not adieu—it is *au revoir,* Mme. Zette," he cried.

She protested tearfully. It was farewell. Aristide darted to his rejected hat and clapped it on the back of his head. He joined her and swore that he would see her again. It was not Aristide Pujol who would allow her to be rent in pieces by the jaws of that crocodile, M. Bocardon. Faith, he would defend her to the last drop of his blood. He would do all manner of gasconading things.

"But what can you do, my poor M. Pujol?" she asked.

"You will see," he replied.

They parted. He watched her until she became a speck and, having joined the other speck, her husband, passed out of sight. Then he set out

through the burning gardens towards the Hôtel du Luxembourg, at the other end of the town.

Aristide had fallen in love. He had fallen in love with Provençal fury. He had done the same thing a hundred times before; but this, he told himself, was the *coup de foudre*—the thunderbolt. The beautiful Arlésienne filled his brain and his senses. Nothing else in the wide world mattered. Nothing else in the wide world occupied his mind. He sped through the hot streets like a meteor in human form. A stout man, sipping syrup and water in the cool beneath the awning of the Café de la Bourse, rose, looked wonderingly after him, and resumed his seat, wiping a perspiring brow.

A short while afterwards Aristide, valise in hand, presented himself at the bureau of the Hôtel de la Curatterie. It was a shabby little hotel, with a shabby little oval sign outside, and was situated in the narrow street of the same name. Within, it was clean and well kept. On the right of the little dark entrance-hall was the *salle à manger,* on the left the bureau and an unenticing hole labelled *salon de correspondance.* A very narrow passage led to the kitchen, and the rest of the hall was blocked by the staircase. An enormous man with a simple, woe-begone fat face and a head of hair like a circular machine-brush was sitting by the bureau window in his shirt-sleeves. Aristide addressed him.

"M. Bocardon?"

"At your service, monsieur."

"Can I have a bedroom?"

"Certainly." He waved a hand towards a set of black sample boxes studded with brass nails and bound with straps that lay in the hall. "The omnibus has brought your boxes. You are M. Lambert?"

"M. Bocardon," said Aristide, in a lordly way, "I am M. Aristide Pujol, and not a commercial traveller. I have come to see the beauties of Nîmes, and have chosen this hotel because I have the honour to be a distant relation of your wife, Mme. Zette Bocardon, whom I have not seen for many years. How is she?"

"Her health is very good," replied M. Bocardon, shortly. He rang a bell.

A dilapidated man in a green baize apron emerged from the dining-room and took Aristide's valise.

"No. 24," said M. Bocardon. Then, swinging his massive form half-way through the narrow bureau door, he called down the passage, "Euphémie!"

A woman's voice responded, and in a moment the woman herself appeared, a pallid, haggard, though more youthful, replica of Zette, with the dark rings of sleeplessness or illness beneath her eyes which looked furtively at the world.

"Tell your sister," said M. Bocardon, "that a

relation of yours has come to stay in the hotel."

He swung himself back into the bureau and took no further notice of the guest.

"A relation?" echoed Euphémie, staring at the smiling, lustrous-eyed Aristide, whose busy brain was wondering how he could mystify this unwelcome and unexpected sister.

"Why, yes. Aristide, cousin to your good Aunt Léonie at Raphèle. Ah—but you are too young to remember me."

"I will tell Zette," she said, disappearing down the narrow passage.

Aristide went to the doorway, and stood there looking out into the not too savoury street. On the opposite side, which was in the shade, the tenants of the modest little shops sat by their doors or on chairs on the pavement. There was considerable whispering among them and various glances were cast at him. Presently footsteps behind caused him to turn. There was Zette. She had evidently been weeping since they had parted, for her eyelids were red. She started on beholding him.

"You?"

He laughed and shook her hesitating hands.

"It is I, Aristide. But you have grown! *Pécaïre!* How you have grown!" He swung her hands apart and laughed merrily in her bewildered eyes. "To

think that the little Zette in pigtails and short check skirt should have grown into this beautiful woman! I compliment you on your wife, M. Bocardon."

M. Bocardon did not reply, but Aristide's swift glance noticed a spasm of pain shoot across his broad face.

"And the good Aunt Léonie? Is she well? And does she still make her *matelotes* of eels? Ah, they were good, those *matelotes*."

"Aunt Léonie died two years ago," said Zette.

"The poor woman! And I who never knew. Tell me about her."

The *salle à manger* door stood open. He drew her thither by his curious fascination. They entered, and he shut the door behind them.

"*Voilà!*" said he. "Didn't I tell you I should see you again?"

"*Vous avez un fameux toupet, vous!*" said Zette, half angrily.

He laughed, having been accused of confounded impudence many times before in the course of his adventurous life.

"If I told my husband he would kill you."

"Precisely. So you're not going to tell him. I adore you. I have come to protect you. *Foi de Provençal.*"

"The only way to protect me is to prove my innocence."

"And then?"

She drew herself up and looked him straight between the eyes.

"I'll recognize that you have a loyal heart, and will be your very good friend."

"Mme. Zette," cried Aristide, "I will devote my life to your service. Tell me the particulars of the affair."

"Ask M. Bocardon." She left him, and sailed out of the room and past the bureau with her proud head in the air.

If Aristide Pujol had the rapturous idea of proving the innocence of Mme. Zette, triumphing over the fat pig of a husband, and eventually, in a fantastic fashion, carrying off the insulted and spotless lady to some bower of delight (the castle in Perpignan—why not?), you must blame, not him, but Provence, whose sons, if not devout, are frankly pagan. Sometimes they are both.

M. Bocardon sat in his bureau, pretending to do accounts and tracing columns of figures with a huge, trembling forefinger. He looked the picture of woe. Aristide decided to bide his opportunity. He went out into the streets again, now with the object of killing time. The afternoon had advanced, and trees and buildings cast cool shadows in which one could walk with comfort; and Nîmes, clear, bright city of wide avenues and broad open spaces, instinct too with the grandeur that was Rome's, is an idler's Paradise. Aristide knew it

well; but he never tired of it. He wandered round the Maison Carrée, his responsive nature delighting in the splendour of the Temple, with its fluted Corinthian columns, its noble entablature, its massive pediment, its perfect proportions; reluctantly turned down the Boulevard Victor Hugo, past the Lycée and the Bourse, made the circuit of the mighty, double-arched oval of the Arena, and then retraced his steps. As he expected, M. Bocardon had left the bureau. It was the hour of absinthe. The porter named M. Bocardon's habitual café. There, in a morose corner of the terrace, Aristide found the huge man gloomily contemplating an absurdly small glass of the bitters known as Dubonnet. Aristide raised his hat, asked permission to join him, and sat down.

"M. Bocardon," said he, carefully mixing the absinthe which he had ordered, "I learn from my fair cousin that there is between you a regrettable misunderstanding, for which I am sincerely sorry."

"She calls it a misunderstanding?" He laughed mirthlessly. "Women have their own vocabulary. Listen, my good sir. There is infamy between us. When a wife betrays a man like me—kind, indulgent, trustful, who has worshipped the ground she treads on—it is not a question of misunderstanding. It is infamy. If she had anywhere to lay her head, I would turn her out of doors to-night. But she has not. You, who are her relative, know I

married her without a dowry. You alone of her family survive."

It was on the tip of Aristide's impulsive tongue to say that he would be only too willing to shelter her, but prudently he refrained.

"She has broken my heart," continued Bocardon.

Aristide asked for details of the unhappy affair. The large man hesitated for a moment and glanced suspiciously at his companion; but, fascinated by the clear, luminous eyes, he launched with Southern violence into a whirling story. The villain was a traveller in buttons—*buttons!* To be wronged by a traveller in diamonds might have its compensations—but buttons! Linen buttons, bone buttons, brass buttons, *trouser buttons!* To be a traveller in the inanity of button-holes was the only lower degradation. His name was Bondon—he uttered it scathingly, as if to decline from a Bocardon to a Bondon was unthinkable. This Bondon was a regular client of the hotel, and such a client!—who never ordered a bottle of *vin cacheté* or coffee or cognac. A contemptible creature. For a long time he had his suspicions. Now he was certain. He tossed off his glass of Dubonnet, ordered another, and spoke incoherently of the opening and shutting of doors, whisperings, of a dreadful incident, the central fact of which was a glimpse of Zette gliding wraith-like down a corridor. Lastly, there was the culminating proof, a letter found that

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"THE VILLAIN WAS A TRAVELLER IN BUTTONS—BUTTONS!"

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morning in Zette's room. He drew a crumpled sheet from his pocket and handed it to Aristide.

It was a crude, flaming, reprehensible, and entirely damning epistle, Aristide turned cold, shivering at the idea of the superb and dainty Zette coming in contact with such abomination. He hated Bondon with a murderous hate. He drank a great gulp of absinthe and wished it were Bondon's blood. Great tears rolled down Bocardon's face, and gathering at the ends of his scrubby moustache dripped in splashes on the marble table.

"I loved her so tenderly, monsieur," said he.

The cry, so human, went straight to Aristide's heart. A sympathetic tear glistened in his bright eyes. He was suddenly filled with an immense pity for this grief-stricken, helpless giant. An odd feminine streak ran through his nature and showed itself in queer places. Impulsively he stretched out his hand.

"You're going?" asked Bocardon.

"No. A sign of good friendship."

They gripped hands across the table. A new emotion thrilled through the facile Aristide.

"Bocardon, I devote myself to you," he cried, with a flamboyant gesture. "What can I do?"

"Alas, nothing," replied the other, miserably.

"And Zette? What does she say to it all?"

The mountainous shoulders heaved with a shrug. "She denies everything. She had never seen the

letter until I showed it to her. She did not know how it came into her room. As if that were possible!"

"It's improbable," said Aristide, gloomily.

They talked. Bocardon, in a choking voice, told the simple tale of their married happiness. It had been a love-match, different from the ordinary marriages of reason and arrangement. Not a cloud since their wedding-day. They were called the turtle-doves of the Rue de la Curatterie. He had not even manifested the jealousy justifiable in the possessor of so beautiful a wife. He had trusted her implicitly. He was certain of her love. That was enough. They had had one child, who died. Grief had brought them even nearer each other. And now this stroke had been dealt. It was a knife being turned round in his heart. It was agony.

They walked back to the hotel together. Zette, who was sitting by the desk in the bureau, rose and, without a word or look, vanished down the passage. Bocardon, with a great sigh, took her place. It was dinner-time. The half-dozen guests and frequenters filled for a moment the little hall, some waiting to wash their hands at the primitive *lavabo* by the foot of the stairs. Aristide accompanied them into the *salle à manger,* where he dined in solemn silence. The dinner over he went out again, passing by the bureau where Bocardon, in its dim

recesses, was eating a sad meal brought to him by the melancholy Euphémie. Zette, he conjectured, was dining in the kitchen. An atmosphere of desolation impregnated the place, as though a corpse were somewhere in the house.

Aristide drank his coffee at the nearest café in a complicated state of mind. He had fallen furiously in love with the lady, believing her to be the victim of a jealous husband. In an outburst of generous emotion he had taken the husband to his heart, seeing that he was a good man stricken to death. Now he loved the lady, loved the husband, and hated the villain Bondon. What Aristide felt, he felt fiercely. He would reconcile these two people he loved, and then go and, if not assassinate Bondon, at least do him some bodily injury. With this idea in his head, he paid for his coffee and went back to the hotel.

He found Zette taking her turn at the bureau, for clients have to be attended to, even in the most distressing circumstances. She was talking to a new arrival, trying to smile a welcome. Aristide, loitering near, watched her beautiful face, to which the perfect classic features gave an air of noble purity. His soul revolted at the idea of her mixing herself up with a sordid wretch like Bondon. It was unbelievable.

"Eh bien?" she said as soon as they were alone.

"Mme. Zette, to-day I called your husband a scoundrel and a crocodile. I was wrong. I find him a man with a beautiful nature."

"You needn't tell me that, M. Aristide."

"You are breaking his heart, Mme. Zette."

"And is he not breaking mine? He has told you, I suppose. Am I responsible for what I know nothing more about than a babe unborn? You don't believe I am speaking the truth? Bah! And your professions this afternoon? Wind and gas, like the words of all men."

"Mme. Zette," cried Aristide, "I said I would devote my life to your service, and so I will. I'll go and find Bondon and kill him."

He watched her narrowly, but she did not grow pale like a woman whose lover is threatened with mortal peril. She said dryly:—

"You had better have some conversation with him first."

"Where is he to be found?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "How do I know? He left by the early train this morning that goes in the direction of Tarascon."

"Then to-morrow," said Aristide, who knew the ways of commercial travellers, "he will be at Tarascon, or at Avignon, or at Arles."

"I heard him say that he had just done Arles."

"*Tant mieux.* I shall find him either at Tarascon or Avignon. And by the Tarasque of Sainte-

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HE BURST INTO SHRIEKS OF LAUGHTER

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Marthe, I'll bring you his head and you can put it up outside as a sign and call the place the 'Hôtel de la Tête Bondon.' "

Early the next morning Aristide started on his quest, without informing the good Bocardon of his intentions. He would go straight to Avignon, as the more likely place. Inquiries at the various hotels would soon enable him to hunt down his quarry; and then—he did not quite know what would happen then—but it would be something picturesque, something entirely unforeseen by Bondon, something to be thrillingly determined by the inspiration of the moment. In any case he would wipe the stain from the family escutcheon. By this time he had convinced himself that he belonged to the Bocardon family.

The only other occupant of the first-class compartment was an elderly Englishwoman of sour aspect. Aristide, his head full of Zette and Bondon, scarcely noticed her. The train started and sped through the sunny land of vine and olive.

They had almost reached Tarascon when a sudden thought hit him between the eyes, like the blow of a fist. He gasped for a moment, then he burst into shrieks of laughter, kicking his legs up and down and waving his arms in maniacal mirth. After that he rose and danced. The sour-faced Englishwoman, in mortal terror, fled into the corridor. She must have reported Aristide's behaviour

to the guard, for in a minute or two that official appeared at the doorway.

"Qu'est-ce qu'il y a?"

Aristide paused in his demonstrations of merriment. "Monsieur," said he, "I have just discovered what I am going to do to M. Bondon."

Delight bubbled out of him as he walked from the Avignon Railway Station up the Cours de la République. The wretch Bondon lay at his mercy. He had not proceeded far, however, when his quick eye caught sight of an object in the ramshackle display of a curiosity dealer's. He paused in front of the window, fascinated. He rubbed his eyes.

"No," said he; "it is not a dream. The *bon Dieu* is on my side."

He went into the shop and bought the object. It was a pair of handcuffs.

At a little after three o'clock the small and dilapidated hotel omnibus drove up before the Hôtel de la Curatterie, and from it descended Aristide Pujol, radiant-eyed, and a scrubby little man with a goatee beard, pince-nez, and a dome-like forehead, who, pale and trembling, seemed stricken with a great fear. It was Bondon. Together they entered the little hall. As soon as Bocardon saw his enemy his eyes blazed with fury, and, uttering an inarticulate roar, he rushed out of the bureau with clenched fists murderously uplifted. The ter-

rified Bondon shrank into a corner, protected by Aristide, who, smiling like an angel of peace, intercepted the onslaught of the huge man.

"Be calm, my good Bocardon, be calm."

But Bocardon would not be calm. He found his voice.

"Ah, scoundrel! Miscreant! Wretch! Traitor!" When his vocabulary of vituperation and his breath failed him, he paused and mopped his forehead.

Bondon came a step or two forward.

"I know, monsieur, I have all the wrong on my side. Your anger is justifiable. But I never dreamt of the disastrous effect of my acts. Let me see her, my good M. Bocardon, I beseech you."

"Let you see her?" said Bocardon, growing purple in the face.

At this moment Zette came running up the passage.

"What is all this noise about?"

"Ah, madame!" cried Bondon, eagerly, "I am heart-broken. You who are so kind—let me see her."

"Hein?" exclaimed Bocardon, in stupefaction.

"See whom?" asked Zette.

"My dear dead one. My dear Euphémie, who has committed suicide."

"But he's mad!" shouted Bocardon, in his great voice. "Euphémie! Euphémie! Come here!"

At the sight of Euphémie, pale and shivering

with apprehension, Bondon sank upon a bench by the wall. He stared at her as if she were a ghost.

"I don't understand," he murmured, faintly, looking like a trapped hare at Aristide Pujol, who, debonair, hands on hips, stood a little way apart.

"Nor I, either," cried Bocardon.

A great light dawned on Zette's beautiful face. "I do understand." She exchanged glances with Aristide. He came forward.

"It's very simple," said he, taking the stage with childlike exultation. "I go to find Bondon this morning to kill him. In the train I have a sudden inspiration, a revelation from Heaven. It is not Zette but Euphémie that is the *bonne amie* of Bondon. I laugh, and frighten a long-toothed English old maid out of her wits. Shall I get out at Tarascon and return to Nîmes and tell you, or shall I go on? I decide to go on. I make my plan. Ah, but when I make a plan, it's all in a second, a flash, *pfuit!* At Avignon I see a pair of handcuffs. I buy them. I spend hours tracking that animal there. At last I find him at the station about to start for Lyon. I tell him I am a police agent. I let him see the handcuffs, which convince him. I tell him Euphémie, in consequence of the discovery of his letter, has committed suicide. There is a *procès-verbal* at which he is wanted. I summon him to accompany me in the name of the law—and there he is."

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"AND YOU!" SHOUTED BOCARDON, FALLING ON ARISTIDE; "I MUST EMBRACE YOU ALSO"

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"Then that letter was not for my wife?" said Bocardon, who was not quick-witted.

"But, no, imbecile!" cried Aristide.

Bocardon hugged his wife in his vast embrace. The tears ran down his cheeks.

"Ah, my little Zette, my little Zette, will you ever pardon me?"

"Oui, je te pardonne, gros jaloux," said Zette.

"And you!" shouted Bocardon, falling on Aristide; "I must embrace you also." He kissed him on both cheeks, in his expansive way, and thrust him towards Zette.

"You can also kiss my wife. It is I, Bocardon, who command it."

The fire of a not ignoble pride raced through Aristide's veins. He was a hero. He knew it. It was a moment worth living.

The embraces and other expressions of joy and gratitude being temporarily suspended, attention was turned to the unheroic couple who up to then had said not one word to each other. The explanation of their conduct, too, was simple, apparently. They were in love. She had no dowry. He could not marry her, as his parents would not give their consent. She, for her part, was frightened to death by the discovery of the letter, lest Bocardon should turn her out of the house.

"What dowry will satisfy your parents?"

"Nothing less than twelve thousand francs."

"I give it," said Bocardon, reckless in his newly-found happiness. "Marry her."

The clock in the bureau struck four. Aristide pulled out his watch.

"Saperlipopette!" he cried, and disappeared like a flash into the street.

"But what's the matter with him?" shouted Bocardon, in amazement.

Zette went to the door. "He's running as if he had the devil at his heels."

"Was he always like that?" asked her husband.

"How always?"

"Parbleu! When you used to see him at your Aunt Léonie's."

Zette flushed red. To repudiate the saviour of her entire family were an act of treachery too black for her ingenuous heart.

"Ah, yes," she replied, calmly, coming back into the hall. "We used to call him Cousin Quicksilver."

In the big avenue Aristide hailed a passing cab.

"To the Hôtel du Luxembourg—at a gallop!"

In the joyous excitement of the past few hours this child of impulse and sunshine, this dragon-fly of a man, had entirely forgotten the appointment at two o'clock with the American millionaire and the fortune that depended on it. He would be angry at being kept waiting. Aristide had met

Americans before. His swift brain invented an elaborate excuse.

He leaped from the cab and entered the vestibule of the hotel.

"Can I see M. Congleton?" he asked at the bureau.

"An American gentleman? He has gone, monsieur. He left by the three-thirty train. Are you M. Pujol? There is a letter for you."

With a sinking heart he opened it and read:—

DEAR SIR,—I was in this hotel at two o'clock, according to arrangement. As my last train to Japan leaves at three-thirty, I regret I cannot await your convenience. The site of the hotel is satisfactory. Your business methods are not. I am sorry, therefore, not to be able to entertain the matter further.—Faithfully,

WILLIAM B. CONGLETON.

He stared at the words for a few paralyzed moments. Then he stuffed the letter into his pocket and broke into a laugh.

"Zut!" said he, using the inelegant expletive whereby a Frenchman most adequately expresses his scorn of circumstance. *"Zut!* If I have lost a fortune, I have gained two devoted friends, so I am the winner on the day's work."

Whereupon he returned gaily to the bosom of the Bocardon family and remained there, its Cousin Quicksilver and its entirely happy and idolized hero,

until the indignation of the eminent M. Say summoned him to Paris.

And that is how Aristide Pujol could live thenceforward on nothing at all at Nîmes, whenever it suited him to visit that historic town.

III

THE ADVENTURE OF THE KIND MR. SMITH

ARISTIDE PUJOL started life on his own account as a *chasseur* in a Nice café—one of those luckless children tightly encased in bottle-green cloth by means of brass buttons, who earn a sketchy livelihood by enduring with cherubic smiles the continuous maledictions of the establishment. There he soothed his hours of servitude by dreams of vast ambitions. He would become the manager of a great hotel—not a contemptible hostelry where commercial travellers and seedy Germans were indifferently bedded, but one of those white palaces where milords (English) and millionaires (American) paid a thousand francs a night for a bedroom and five louis for a glass of beer. Now, in order to derive such profit from the Anglo-Saxon a knowledge of English was indispensable. He resolved to learn the language. How he did so, except by sheer effrontery, taking linguistic toll of frequenters of the café, would be a mystery to anyone unacquainted with Aristide. But

to his friends his mastery of the English tongue in such circumstances is comprehensible. To Aristide the impossible was ever the one thing easy of attainment; the possible the one thing he never could achieve. That was the paradoxical nature of the man. Before his days of hunted-little-devildom were over he had acquired sufficient knowledge of English to carry him, a few years later, through various vicissitudes in England, until, fired by new social ambitions and self-educated in a haphazard way, he found himself appointed Professor of French in an academy for young ladies.

One of these days, when I can pin my dragonfly friend down to a plain, unvarnished autobiography, I may be able to trace some chronological sequence in the kaleidoscopic changes in his career. But hitherto, in his talks with me, he flits about from any one date to any other during a couple of decades, in a manner so confusing that for the present I abandon such an attempt. All I know of the date of the episode I am about to chronicle is that it occurred immediately after the termination of his engagement at the academy just mentioned. Somehow, Aristide's history is a category of terminations.

If the head mistress of the academy had herself played dragon at his classes, all would have gone well. He would have made his pupils conjugate irregular verbs, rendered them adepts in the mys-

teries of the past participle and the subjunctive mood, and turned them out quite innocent of the idiomatic quaintnesses of the French tongue. But *dis aliter visum.* The gods always saw wrong-headedly otherwise in the case of Aristide. A weak-minded governess—and in a governess a sense of humour and of novelty is always a sign of a weak mind—played dragon during Aristide's lessons. She appreciated his method, which was colloquial. The colloquial Aristide was jocular. His lessons therefore were a giggling joy from beginning to end. He imparted to his pupils delicious knowledge. *En avez-vous des-z-homards? Oh, les sales bêtes, elles ont du poil aux pattes,* which, being translated, is: "Have you any lobsters? Oh, the dirty animals, they have hair on their feet"—a catch phrase which, some years ago, added greatly to the gaiety of Paris, but in which I must confess to seeing no gleam of wit—became the historic property of the school. He recited to them, till they were word-perfect, a music-hall ditty of the early 'eighties—*Sur le bi, sur le banc, sur le bi du bout du banc,* and delighted them with dissertations on Mme. Yvette Guilbert's earlier repertoire. But for him they would have gone to their lives' end without knowing that *pognon* meant money; *rouspétance,* assaulting the police; *thune,* a five-franc piece; and *bouffer,* to take nourishment. He made (according to his own statement) French

a living language. There was never a school in Great Britain, the Colonies, or America on which the Parisian accent was so electrically impressed. The retort, *Eh! ta sœur,* was the purest Montmartre; also *Fich'-moi la paix, mon petit,* and *Tu as un toupet, toi;* and the delectable locution, *Allons étrangler un perroquet* (let us strangle a parrot), employed by Apaches when inviting each other to drink a glass of absinthe, soon became current French in the school for invitations to surreptitious cocoa-parties.

The progress that academy made in a real grip of the French language was miraculous; but the knowledge it gained in French grammar and syntax was deplorable. A certain mid-term examination —the paper being set by a neighbouring vicar—produced awful results. The phrase, "How do you do, dear?" which ought, by all the rules of Stratford-atte-Bowe, to be translated by *Comment vous portez-vous, ma chère?* was rendered by most of the senior scholars *Eh, ma vieille, ca boulotte?* One innocent and anachronistic damsel, writing on the execution of Charles I., declared that he *cracha dans le panier* in 1649, thereby mystifying the good vicar, who was unaware that "to spit into the basket" is to be guillotined. This wealth of vocabulary was discounted by abject poverty in other branches of the language. No one could give a list of the words in *"al"* that took *"s"* in the plural,

no one knew anything at all about the defective verb *échoir,* and the orthography of the school would have disgraced a kindergarten. The head mistress suspected a lack of method in the teaching of M. Pujol, and one day paid his class a surprise visit.

The sight that met her eyes petrified her. The class, including the governess, bubbled and gurgled and shrieked with laughter. M. Pujol, his bright eyes agleam with merriment and his arms moving in frantic gestures, danced about the platform. He was telling them a story—and when Aristide told a story, he told it with the eloquence of his entire frame. He bent himself double and threw out his hands.

"Il était saoûl comme un porc," he shouted.

And then came the hush of death. The rest of the artless tale about the man as drunk as a pig was never told. The head mistress, indignant majesty, strode up the room.

"M. Pujol, you have a strange way of giving French lessons."

"I believe, madame," said he, with a polite bow, "in interesting my pupils in their studies."

"Pupils have to be taught, not interested," said the head mistress. "Will you kindly put the class through some irregular verbs."

So for the remainder of the lesson Aristide, under the freezing eyes of the head mistress, put his

sorrowful class through irregular verbs, of which his own knowledge was singularly inexact, and at the end received his dismissal. In vain he argued. Outraged Minerva was implacable. Go he must.

We find him, then, one miserable December evening, standing on the arrival platform of Euston Station (the academy was near Manchester), an unwonted statue of dubiety. At his feet lay his meagre valise; in his hand was an enormous bouquet, a useful tribute of esteem from his disconsolate pupils; around him luggage-laden porters and passengers hurried; in front were drawn up the long line of cabs, their drivers' waterproofs glistening with wet; and in his pocket rattled the few paltry coins that, for Heaven knew how long, were to keep him from starvation. Should he commit the extravagance of taking a cab or should he go forth, valise in hand, into the pouring rain? He hesitated.

"Sacré mille cochons! Quel chien de climat!" he muttered.

A smart footman standing by turned quickly and touched his hat.

"Beg pardon, sir; I'm from Mr. Smith."

"I'm glad to hear it, my friend," said Aristide.

"You're the French gentleman from Manchester?"

"Decidedly," said Aristide.

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STANDING ON THE ARRIVAL PLATFORM OF EUSTON STATION

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"Then, sir, Mr. Smith has sent the carriage for you."

"That's very kind of him," said Aristide.

The footman picked up the valise and darted down the platform. Aristide followed. The footman held invitingly open the door of a cosy brougham. Aristide paused for the fraction of a second. Who was this hospitable Mr. Smith?

"Bah!" said he to himself, "the best way of finding out is to go and see."

He entered the carriage, sank back luxuriously on the soft cushions, and inhaled the warm smell of leather. They started, and soon the pelting rain beat harmlessly against the windows. Aristide looked out at the streaming streets, and, hugging himself comfortably, thanked Providence and Mr. Smith. But who was Mr. Smith? *Tiens,* thought he, there were two little Miss Smiths at the academy; he had pitied them because they had chilblains, freckles, and perpetual colds in their heads; possibly this was their kind papa. But, after all, what did it matter whose papa he was? He was expecting him. He had sent the carriage for him. Evidently a well-bred and attentive person. And *tiens!* there was even a hot-water can on the floor of the brougham. "He thinks of everything, that man," said Aristide. "I feel I am going to like him."

The carriage stopped at a house in Hampstead,

standing, as far as he could see in the darkness, in its own grounds. The footman opened the door for him to alight and escorted him up the front steps. A neat parlourmaid received him in a comfortably-furnished hall and took his hat and great-coat and magnificent bouquet.

"Mr. Smith hasn't come back yet from the City, sir; but Miss Christabel is in the drawing-room."

"Ah!" said Aristide. "Please give me back my bouquet."

The maid showed him into the drawing-room. A pretty girl of three-and-twenty rose from a fender-stool and advanced smilingly to meet him.

"Good afternoon, M. le Baron. I was wondering whether Thomas would spot you. I'm so glad he did. You see, neither father nor I could give him any description, for we had never seen you."

This fitted in with his theory. But why Baron? After all; why not? The English loved titles.

"He seems to be an intelligent fellow, mademoiselle."

There was a span of silence. The girl looked at the bouquet, then at Aristide, who looked at the girl, then at the bouquet, then at the girl again.

"Mademoiselle," said he, "will you deign to accept these flowers as a token of my respectful homage?"

Miss Christabel took the flowers and blushed prettily. She had dark hair and eyes and a fasci-

nating, upturned little nose, and the kindest little mouth in the world.

"An Englishman would not have thought of that," she said.

Aristide smiled in his roguish way and raised a deprecating hand.

"Oh, yes, he would. But he would not have had—what you call the cheek to do it."

Miss Christabel laughed merrily, invited him to a seat by the fire, and comforted him with tea and hot muffins. The frank charm of his girl-hostess captivated Aristide and drove from his mind the riddle of his adventure. Besides, think of the Arabian Nights' enchantment of the change from his lonely and shabby bed-sitting-room in the Rusholme Road to this fragrant palace with princess and all to keep him company! He watched the firelight dancing through her hair, the dainty play of laughter over her face, and decided that the brougham had transported him to Bagdad instead of Hampstead.

"You have the air of a veritable princess," said he.

"I once met a princess—at a charity bazaar—and she was a most matter-of-fact, businesslike person."

"Bah!" said Aristide. "A princess of a charity bazaar! I was talking of the princess in a fairy-tale. They are the only real ones."

"Do you know," said Miss Christabel, "that when men pay such compliments to English girls they are apt to get laughed at?"

"Englishmen, yes," replied Aristide, "because they think over a compliment for a week, so that by the time they pay it, it is addled, like a bad egg. But we of Provence pay tribute to beauty straight out of our hearts. It is true. It is sincere. And what comes out of the heart is not ridiculous."

Again the girl coloured and laughed. "I've always heard that a Frenchman makes love to every woman he meets."

"Naturally," said Aristide. "If they are pretty. What else are pretty women for? Otherwise they might as well be hideous."

"Oh!" said the girl, to whom this Provençal point of view had not occurred.

"So, if I make love to you, it is but your due."

"I wonder what my fiancé would say if he heard you?"

"Your——?"

"My fiancé! There's his photograph on the table beside you. He is six foot one, and so jealous!" she laughed again.

"The Turk!" cried Aristide, his swiftly-conceived romance crumbling into dust. Then he brightened up. "But when this six feet of muscle and egotism is absent, surely other poor mortals can glean a smile?"

"You will observe that I'm not frowning," said Miss Christabel. "But you must not call my fiancé a Turk, for he's a very charming fellow whom I hope you'll like very much."

Aristide sighed. "And the name of this thrice-blessed mortal?"

Miss Christabel told his name—one Harry Ralston—and not only his name, but, such was the peculiar, childlike charm of Aristide Pujol, also many other things about him. He was the Honourable Harry Ralston, the heir to a great brewery peerage, and very wealthy. He was a member of Parliament, and but for Parliamentary duties would have dined there that evening; but he was to come in later, as soon as he could leave the House. He also had a house in Hampshire, full of the most beautiful works of art. It was through their common hobby that her father and Harry had first made acquaintance.

"We're supposed to have a very fine collection here," she said, with a motion of her hand.

Aristide looked round the walls and saw them hung with pictures in gold frames. In those days he had not acquired an extensive culture. Besides, who having before him the firelight gleaming through Miss Christabel's hair could waste his time over painted canvas? She noted his cursory glance.

"I thought you were a connoisseur?"

"I am," said Aristide, his bright eyes fixed on her in frank admiration.

She blushed again; but this time she rose.

"I must go and dress for dinner. Perhaps you would like to be shown your room?"

He hung his head on one side.

"Have I been too bold, mademoiselle?"

"I don't know," she said. "You see, I've never met a Frenchman before."

"Then a world of undreamed-of homage is at your feet," said he.

A servant ushered him up broad, carpeted staircases into a bedroom such as he had never seen in his life before. It was all curtains and hangings and rugs and soft couches and satin quilts and dainty writing-tables and subdued lights, and a great fire glowed red and cheerful, and before it hung a clean shirt. His poor little toilet apparatus was laid on the dressing-table, and (with a tact which he did not appreciate, for he had, sad to tell, no dress-suit) the servant had spread his precious frock-coat and spare pair of trousers on the bed. On the pillow lay his night-shirt, neatly folded.

"Evidently," said Aristide, impressed by these preparations, "it is expected that I wash myself now and change my clothes, and that I sleep here for the night. And for all that the ravishing Miss Christabel is engaged to her honourable

Harry, this is none the less a corner of Paradise."

So Aristide attired himself in his best, which included a white tie and a pair of nearly new brown boots—a long task, as he found that his valise had been spirited away and its contents, including the white tie of ceremony (he had but one), hidden in unexpected drawers and wardrobes—and eventually went downstairs into the drawing-room. There he found Miss Christabel and, warming himself on the hearthrug, a bald-headed, beefy-faced Briton, with little pig's eyes and a hearty manner, attired in a dinner-suit.

"My dear fellow," said this personage, with outstretched hand, "I'm delighted to have you here. I've heard so much about you; and my little girl has been singing your praises."

"Mademoiselle is too kind," said Aristide.

"You must take us as you find us," said Mr. Smith. "We're just ordinary folk, but I can give you a good bottle of wine and a good cigar—it's only in England, you know, that you can get champagne fit to drink and cigars fit to smoke—and I can give you a glimpse of a modest English home. I believe you haven't a word for it in French."

"*Ma foi,* no," said Aristide, who had once or twice before heard this lunatic charge brought against his country. "In France the men all live in cafés, the children are all put out to nurse, and

the women, saving the respect of mademoiselle—well, the less said about them the better."

"England is the only place, isn't it?" Mr. Smith, declared, heartily. "I don't say that Paris hasn't its points. But after all—the Moulin Rouge and the Folies Bergères and that sort of thing soon pall, you know—soon pall."

"Yet Paris has its serious side," argued Aristide. "There is always the tomb of Napoleon."

"Papa will never take me to Paris," sighed the girl.

"You shall go there on your honeymoon," said Mr. Smith.

Dinner was announced. Aristide gave his arm to Miss Christabel, and proud not only of his partner, but also of his frock-coat, white tie, and shiny brown boots, strutted into the dining-room. The host sat at the end of the beautifully set table, his daughter on his right, Aristide on his left. The meal began gaily. The kind Mr. Smith was in the best of humours.

"And how is our dear old friend, Jules Dancourt?" he asked.

"Tiens!" said Aristide, to himself, "we have a dear friend Jules Dancourt. Wonderfully well," he replied at a venture, "but he suffers terribly at times from the gout."

"So do I, confound it!" said Mr. Smith, drinking sherry.

"You and the good Jules were always sympathetic," said Aristide. "Ah! he has spoken to me so often about you, the tears in his eyes."

"Men cry, my dear, in France," Mr. Smith explained. "They also kiss each other."

"Ah, mais c'est un beau pays, mademoiselle!" cried Aristide, and he began to talk of France and to draw pictures of his country which set the girl's eyes dancing. After that he told some of the funny little stories which had brought him disaster at the academy. Mr. Smith, with jovial magnanimity, declared that he was the first Frenchman he had ever met with a sense of humour.

"But I thought, Baron," said he, "that you lived all your life shut up in that old château of yours?"

"Tiens!" thought Aristide. "I am still a Baron, and I have an old château."

"Tell us about the château. Has it a fosse and a drawbridge and a Gothic chapel?" asked Miss Christabel.

"Which one do you mean?" inquired Aristide, airily. "For I have two."

When relating to me this Arabian Nights' adventure, he drew my special attention to his astuteness.

His host's eye quivered in a wink. "The one in Languedoc," said he.

Languedoc! Almost Pujol's own country! With entire lack of morality, but with picturesque imag-

ination, Aristide plunged into a description of that non-existent baronial hall. Fosse, drawbridge, Gothic chapel were but insignificant features. It had tourelles, emblazoned gateways, bastions, donjons, barbicans; it had innumerable rooms; in the *salle des chevaliers* two hundred men-at-arms had his ancestors fed at a sitting. There was the room in which François Premier had slept, and one in which Joan of Arc had almost been assassinated. What the name of himself or of his ancestors was supposed to be Aristide had no ghost of an idea. But as he proceeded with the erection of his airy palace he gradually began to believe in it. He invested the place with a living atmosphere; conjured up a staff of family retainers, notably one Marie-Joseph Loufoque, the wizened old major-domo, with his long white whiskers and blue and silver livery. There were also Madeline Mioulles, the cook, and Bernadet the groom, and La Petite Fripette the goose girl. Ah! they should see La Petite Fripette! And he kept dogs and horses and cows and ducks and hens—and there was a great pond whence frogs were drawn to be fed for the consumption of the household.

Miss Christabel shivered. "I should not like to eat frogs."

"They also eat snails," said her father.

"I have a snail farm," said Aristide. "You never saw such interesting little animals. They are so

"AH! THE PICTURES," CRIED ARISTIDE, WITH A WIDE SWEEP OF HIS ARMS

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intelligent. If you're kind to them they come and eat out of your hand."

"You've forgotten the pictures," said Mr. Smith.

"Ah! the pictures," cried Aristide, with a wide sweep of his arms. "Galleries full of them. Raphael, Michael Angelo, Wiertz, Reynolds——"

He paused, not in order to produce the effect of a dramatic aposiopesis, but because he could not for the moment remember other names of painters.

"It is a truly historical château," said he.

"I should love to see it," said the girl.

Aristide threw out his arms across the table. "It is yours, mademoiselle, for your honeymoon," said he.

Dinner came to an end. Miss Christabel left the gentlemen to their wine, an excellent port whose English qualities were vaunted by the host. Aristide, full of food and drink and the mellow glories of the castle in Languedoc, and smoking an enormous cigar, felt at ease with all the world. He knew he should like the kind Mr. Smith, hospitable though somewhat insular man. He could stay with him for a week—or a month—why not a year?

After coffee and liqueurs had been served Mr. Smith rose and switched on a powerful electric light at the end of the large room, showing a picture on an easel covered by a curtain. He beckoned to Aristide to join him and, drawing the curtain, disclosed the picture.

"There!" said he. "Isn't it a stunner?"

It was a picture all grey skies and grey water and grey feathery trees, and a little man in the foreground wore a red cap.

"It is beautiful, but indeed it is magnificent!" cried Aristide, always impressionable to things of beauty.

"Genuine Corot, isn't it?"

"Without doubt," said Aristide.

His host poked him in the ribs. "I thought I'd astonish you. You wouldn't believe Gottschalk could have done it. There it is—as large as life and twice as natural. If you or anyone else can tell it from a genuine Corot I'll eat my hat. And all for eight pounds."

Aristide looked at the beefy face and caught a look of cunning in the little pig's eyes.

"Now are you satisfied?" asked Mr. Smith.

"More than satisfied," said Aristide, though what he was to be satisfied about passed, for the moment, his comprehension.

"If it was a copy of an existing picture, you know—one might have understood it—that, of course, would be dangerous—but for a man to go and get bits out of various Corots and stick them together like this is miraculous. If it hadn't been for a matter of business principle I'd have given the fellow eight guineas instead of pounds—hanged if I wouldn't! He deserves it."

"He does indeed," said Aristide Pujol.

"And now that you've seen it with your own eyes, what do you think you might ask me for it? I suggested something between two and three thousand—shall we say three? You're the owner, you know." Again the process of rib-digging. "Came out of that historic château of yours. My eye! you're a holy terror when you begin to talk. You almost persuaded me it was real."

"Tiens!" said Aristide to himself. "I don't seem to have a château after all."

"Certainly three thousand," said he, with a grave face.

"That young man thinks he knows a lot, but he doesn't," said Mr. Smith.

"Ah!" said Aristide, with singular laconicism.

"Not a blooming thing," continued his host. "But he'll pay three thousand, which is the principal, isn't it? He's partner in the show, you know, Ralston, Wiggins, and Wix's Brewery"—Aristide pricked up his ears—"and when his doddering old father dies he'll be Lord Ranelagh and come into a million of money."

"Has he seen the picture?" asked Aristide.

"Oh, yes. Regards it as a masterpiece. Didn't Brauneberger tell you of the Lancret we planted on the American?" Mr. Smith rubbed hearty hands at the memory of the iniquity. "Same old game. Always easy. I have nothing to do with the bar-

gaining or the sale. Just an old friend of the ruined French nobleman with the historic château and family treasures. He comes along and fixes the price. I told our friend Harry——"

"Good," thought Aristide. "This is the same Honourable Harry, M.P., who is engaged to the ravishing Miss Christabel."

"I told him," said Mr. Smith, "that it might come to three or four thousand. He jibbed a bit—so when I wrote to you I said two or three. But you might try him with three to begin with."

Aristide went back to the table and poured himself out a fresh glass of his kind host's 1865 brandy and drank it off.

"Exquisite, my dear fellow," said he. "I've none finer in my historic château."

"Don't suppose you have," grinned the host, joining him. He slapped him on the back. "Well," said he, with a shifty look in his little pig's eyes, "let us talk business. What do you think would be your fair commission? You see, all the trouble and invention have been mine. What do you say to four hundred pounds?"

"Five," said Aristide, promptly.

A sudden gleam came into the little pig's eyes.

"Done!" said Mr. Smith, who had imagined that the other would demand a thousand and was prepared to pay eight hundred. "Done!" said he again.

They shook hands to seal the bargain and drank another glass of old brandy. At that moment, a servant, entering, took the host aside.

"Please excuse me a moment," said he, and went with the servant out of the room.

Aristide, left alone, lighted another of his kind host's fat cigars and threw himself into a great leathern arm-chair by the fire, and surrendered himself deliciously to the soothing charm of the moment. Now and then he laughed, finding a certain comicality in his position. And what a charming father-in-law, this kind Mr. Smith!

His cheerful reflections were soon disturbed by the sudden irruption of his host and a grizzled, elderly, foxy-faced gentleman with a white moustache, wearing the ribbon of the Legion of Honour in the buttonhole of his overcoat.

"Here, you!" cried the kind Mr. Smith, striding up to Aristide, with a very red face. "Will you have the kindness to tell me who the devil you are?"

Aristide rose, and, putting his hands behind the tails of his frock-coat, stood smiling radiantly on the hearthrug. A wit much less alert than my irresponsible friend's would have instantly appreciated the fact that the real Simon Pure had arrived on the scene.

"I, my dear friend," said he, "am the Baron de Je ne Sais Plus."

"You're a confounded impostor," spluttered Mr. Smith.

"And this gentleman here to whom I have not had the pleasure of being introduced?" asked Aristide, blandly.

"I am M. Poiron, monsieur, the agent of Messrs. Brauneberger and Compagnie, art dealers, of the Rue Notre Dame des Petits Champs of Paris," said the new-comer, with an air of defiance.

"Ah, I thought you were the Baron," said Aristide.

"There's no blooming Baron at all about it!" screamed Mr. Smith. "Are you Poiron, or is he?"

"I would not have a name like Poiron for anything in the world," said Aristide. "My name is Aristide Pujol, soldier of fortune, at your service."

"How the blazes did you get here?"

"Your servant asked me if I was a French gentleman from Manchester. I was. He said that Mr. Smith had sent his carriage for me. I thought it hospitable of the kind Mr. Smith. I entered the carriage—*et voilà!*"

"Then clear out of here this very minute," said Mr. Smith, reaching forward his hand to the bell-push.

Aristide checked his impulsive action.

"Pardon me, dear host," said he. "It is raining dogs and cats outside. I am very comfortable in

your luxurious home. I am here, and here I stay."

"I'm shot if you do," said the kind Mr. Smith, his face growing redder and uglier. "Now, will you go out, or will you be thrown out?"

Aristide, who had no desire whatever to be ejected from this snug nest into the welter of the wet and friendless world, puffed at his cigar, and looked at his host with the irresistible drollery of his eyes.

"You forget, *mon cher ami,*" said he, "that neither the beautiful Miss Christabel nor her affianced, the Honourable Harry, M.P., would care to know that the talented Gottschalk got only eight pounds, not even guineas, for painting that three-thousand-pound picture."

"So it's blackmail, eh?"

"Precisely," said Aristide, "and I don't blush at it."

"You infernal little blackguard!"

"I seem to be in congenial company," said Aristide. "I don't think our friend M. Poiron has more scruples than he has right to the ribbon of the Legion of Honour which he is wearing."

"How much will you take to go out? I have a cheque-book handy."

Mr. Smith moved a few steps from the hearth-rug. Aristide sat down in the arm-chair. An engaging, fantastic impudence was one of the charms of Aristide Pujol.

"I'll take five hundred pounds," said he, "to stay in."

"Stay in?" Mr. Smith grew apoplectic.

"Yes," said Aristide. "You can't do without me. Your daughter and your servants know me as M. le Baron—by the way, what is my name? And where is my historic château in Languedoc?"

"Mireilles," said M. Poiron, who was sitting grim and taciturn on one of the dining-room chairs. "And the place is the same, near Montpellier."

"I like to meet an intelligent man," said Aristide.

"I should like to wring your infernal neck," said the kind Mr. Smith. "But, by George, if we do let you in you'll have to sign me a receipt implicating yourself up to the hilt. I'm not going to be put into the cart by you, you can bet your life."

"Anything you like," said Aristide, "so long as we all swing together."

Now, when Aristide Pujol arrived at this point in his narrative I, his chronicler, who am nothing if not an eminently respectable, law-abiding Briton, took him warmly to task for his sheer absence of moral sense. His eyes, as they sometimes did, assumed a luminous pathos.

"My dear friend," said he, "have you ever faced the world in a foreign country in December with no character and fifteen pounds five and three-

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"I'LL TAKE FIVE HUNDRED POUNDS," SAID HE, "TO STAY IN"

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pence in your pocket? Five hundred pounds was a fortune. It is one now. And to be gained just by lending oneself to a good farce, which didn't hurt anybody. You and your British morals! Bah!" said he, with a fine flourish.

Aristide, after much parleying, was finally admitted into the nefarious brotherhood. He was to retain his rank as the Baron de Mireilles, and play the part of the pecuniarily inconvenienced nobleman forced to sell some of his rare collection. Mr. Smith had heard of the Corot through their dear old common friend, Jules Dancourt of Rheims, had mentioned it alluringly to the Honourable Harry, had arranged for the Baron, who was visiting England, to bring it over and dispatch it to Mr. Smith's house, and on his return from Manchester to pay a visit to Mr. Smith, so that he could meet the Honourable Harry in person. In whatever transaction ensued Mr. Smith, so far as his prospective son-in-law was concerned, was to be the purely disinterested friend. It was Aristide's wit which invented a part for the supplanted M. Poiron. He should be the eminent Parisian expert who, chancing to be in London, had been telephoned for by the kind Mr. Smith.

"It would not be wise for M. Poiron," said Aristide, chuckling inwardly with puckish glee, "to stay here for the night—or for two or three days—or

a week—like myself. He must go back to his hotel when the business is concluded."

"Mais, pardon!" cried M. Poiron, who had been formally invited, and had arrived late solely because he had missed his train at Manchester, and come on by the next one. "I cannot go out into the wet, and I have no hotel to go to."

Aristide appealed to his host. "But he is unreasonable, *cher ami*. He must play his *rôle*. M. Poiron has been telephoned for. He can't possibly stay here. Surely five hundred pounds is worth one little night of discomfort? And there are a legion of hotels in London."

"Five hundred pounds!" exclaimed M. Poiron. *"Qu'est-ce que vous chantez là?* I want more than five hundred pounds."

"Then you're jolly well not going to get it," cried Mr. Smith, in a rage. "And as for you"—he turned on Aristide—"I'll wring your infernal neck yet."

"Calm yourself, calm yourself!" smiled Aristide, who was enjoying himself hugely.

At this moment the door opened and Miss Christabel appeared. On seeing the decorated stranger she started with a little "Oh!" of surprise.

"I beg your pardon."

Mr. Smith's angry face wreathed itself in smiles.

"This, my darling, is M. Poiron, the eminent

Paris expert, who has been good enough to come and give us his opinion on the picture."

M. Poiron bowed. Aristide advanced.

"Mademoiselle, your appearance is like a mirage in a desert."

She smiled indulgently and turned to her father. "I've been wondering what had become of you. Harry has been here for the last half-hour."

"Bring him in, dear child, bring him in!" said Mr. Smith, with all the heartiness of the fine old English gentleman. "Our good friends are dying to meet him."

The girl flickered out of the room like a sunbeam (the phrase is Aristide's), and the three precious rascals put their heads together in a hurried and earnest colloquy. Presently Miss Christabel returned, and with her came the Honourable Harry Ralston, a tall, soldierly fellow, with close-cropped fair curly hair and a fair moustache, and frank blue eyes that, even in Parliament, had seen no harm in his fellow-creatures. Aristide's magical vision caught him wincing ever so little at Mr. Smith's effusive greeting and overdone introductions. He shook Aristide warmly by the hand.

"You have a beauty there, Baron, a perfect beauty," said he, with the insane ingenuousness of youth. "I wonder how you can manage to part with it."

"Ma foi," said Aristide, with his back against

the end of the dining-table and gazing at the masterpiece. "I have so many at the Château de Mireilles. When one begins to collect, you know—and when one's grandfather and father have had also the divine mania——"

"You were saying, M. le Baron," said M. Poiron of Paris, "that your respected grandfather bought this direct from Corot himself."

"A commission," said Aristide. "My grandfather was a patron of Corot."

"Do you like it, dear?" asked the Honourable Harry.

"Oh, yes!" replied the girl, fervently. "It is beautiful. I feel like Harry about it." She turned to Aristide. "How can you part with it? Were you really in earnest when you said you would like me to come and see your collection?"

"For me," said Aristide, "it would be a visit of enchantment."

"You must take me, then," she whispered to Harry. "The Baron has been telling us about his lovely old château."

"Will you come, monsieur?" asked Aristide.

"Since I'm going to rob you of your picture," said the young man, with smiling courtesy, "the least I can do is to pay you a visit of apology. Lovely!" said he, going up to the Corot.

Aristide took Miss Christabel, now more bewitching than ever with the glow of young love in

her eyes and a flush on her cheek, a step or two aside and whispered:—

"But he is charming, your fiancé! He almost deserves his good fortune."

"Why almost?" she laughed, shyly.

"It is not a man, but a demi-god, that would deserve you, mademoiselle."

M. Poiron's harsh voice broke out.

"You see, it is painted in the beginning of Corot's later manner—it is 1864. There is the mystery which, when he was quite an old man, became a trick. If you were to put it up to auction at Christie's it would fetch, I am sure, five thousand pounds."

"That's more than I can afford to give," said the young man, with a laugh. "Mr. Smith mentioned something between three and four thousand pounds. I don't think I can go above three."

"I have nothing to do with it, my dear boy, nothing whatever," said Mr. Smith, rubbing his hands. "You wanted a Corot. I said I thought I could put you on to one. It's for the Baron here to mention his price. I retire now and for ever."

"Well, Baron?" said the young man, cheerfully. "What's your idea?"

Aristide came forward and resumed his place at the end of the table. The picture was in front of him beneath the strong electric light; on his left

stood Mr. Smith and Poiron, on his right Miss Christabel and the Honourable Harry.

"I'll not take three thousand pounds for it," said Aristide. "A picture like that! Never!"

"I assure you it would be a fair price," said Poiron.

"You mentioned that figure yourself only just now," said Mr. Smith, with an ugly glitter in his little pig's eyes.

"I presume, gentlemen," said Aristide, "that this picture is my own property." He turned engagingly to his host. "Is it not, *cher ami?*"

"Of course it is. Who said it wasn't?"

"And you, M. Poiron, acknowledge formally that it is mine," he asked, in French.

"Sans aucun doute."

"Eh bien," said Aristide, throwing open his arms and gazing round sweetly. "I have changed my mind. I do not sell the picture at all."

"Not sell it? What the—what do you mean?" asked Mr. Smith, striving to mellow the gathering thunder on his brow.

"I do not sell," said Aristide. "Listen, my dear friends!" He was in the seventh heaven of happiness—the principal man, the star, taking the centre of the stage. "I have an announcement to make to you. I have fallen desperately in love with mademoiselle."

There was a general gasp. Mr. Smith looked at

him, red-faced and open-mouthed. Miss Christabel blushed furiously and emitted a sound half between a laugh and a scream. Harry Ralston's eyes flashed.

"My dear sir——" he began.

"Pardon," said Aristide, disarming him with the merry splendour of his glance. "I do not wish to take mademoiselle from you. My love is hopeless! I know it. But it will feed me to my dying day. In return for the joy of this hopeless passion I will not sell you the picture—I give it to you as a wedding present."

He stood, with the air of a hero, both arms extended towards the amazed pair of lovers.

"I give it to you," said he. "It is mine. I have no wish but for your happiness. In my Chateau de Mireilles there are a hundred others."

"This is madness!" said Mr. Smith, bursting with suppressed indignation, so that his bald head grew scarlet.

"My dear fellow!" said Mr. Harry Ralston. "It is unheard-of generosity on your part. But we can't accept it."

"Then," said Aristide, advancing dramatically to the picture, "I take it under my arm, I put it in a hansom cab, and I go with it back to Languedoc."

Mr. Smith caught him by the wrist and dragged him out of the room.

"You little brute! Do you want your neck broken?"

"Do you want the marriage of your daughter with the rich and Honourable Harry broken?" asked Aristide.

"Oh, damn! Oh, damn! Oh, damn!" cried Mr. Smith, stamping about helplessly and half weeping.

Aristide entered the dining-room and beamed on the company.

"The kind Mr. Smith has consented. Mr. Honourable Harry and Miss Christabel, there is your Corot. And now, may I be permitted?" He rang the bell. A servant appeared.

"Some champagne to drink to the health of the fiancés," he cried. "Lots of champagne."

Mr. Smith looked at him almost admiringly.

"By Jove!" he muttered. "You *have* got a nerve."

"Voilà!" said Aristide, when he had finished the story.

"And did they accept the Corot?" I asked.

"Of course. It is hanging now in the big house in Hampshire. I stayed with the kind Mr. Smith for six weeks," he added, doubling himself up in his chair and hugging himself with mirth, "and we became very good friends. And I was at the wedding."

"And what about their honeymoon visit to Languedoc?"

"Alas!" said Aristide. "The morning before the wedding I had a telegram—it was from my old father at Aigues-Mortes—to tell me that the historic Château de Mireilles, with my priceless collection of pictures, had been burned to the ground."

IV.

THE ADVENTURE OF THE FOUNDLING

THERE was a time when Aristide Pujol, in sole charge of an automobile, went gaily scuttering over the roads of France. I use the word advisedly. If you had heard the awful thing as it passed by you would agree that it is the only word adequate to express its hideous mode of progression. It was a two-seated, scratched, battered, ramshackle tin concern of hoary antiquity, belonging to the childhood of the race. Not only horses, but other automobiles shied at it. It was a vehicle of derision. Yet Aristide regarded it with glowing pride and drove it with such daredevilry that the parts must have held together only through sheer breathless wonder. Had it not been for the car, he told me, he would not have undertaken the undignified employment in which he was then engaged—the mountebank selling of a corn-cure in the public places of small towns and villages. It was not a fitting pursuit for a late managing director of a public company and an ex-Professor of French in an English Academy for Young La-

dies. He wanted to rise, *ma foi,* not descend in the social scale. But when hunger drives—*que voulez-vous?* Besides, there was the automobile. It is true he had bound himself by his contract to exhibit a board at the back bearing a flaming picture of the success of the cure and a legend: *"Guérissez vos cors,"* and to display a banner with the same device, when weather permitted. But, still, there was the automobile.

It had been lying for many motor-ages in the shed of the proprietors of the cure, the Maison Hiéropath of Marseilles, neglected, forlorn, eaten by rust and worm, when suddenly an idea occurred to their business imagination. Why should they not use the automobile to advertise and sell the cure about the country? The apostle in charge would pay for his own petrol, take a large percentage on sales, and the usual traveller's commission on orders that he might place. But where to find an apostle? Brave and desperate men came in high hopes, looked at the car, and, shaking their heads sorrowfully, went away. At last, at the loosest of ends, came Aristide. The splendour of the idea —a poet, in his way, was Aristide, and the Idea was the thing that always held him captive—the splendour of the idea of dashing up to hotels in his own automobile dazed him. He beheld himself doing his hundred kilometres an hour and trailing clouds of glory whithersoever he went. To a child

a moth-eaten rocking-horse is a fiery Arab of the plains; to Aristide Pujol this cheat of the scrap-heap was a sixty-horse-power thunderer and devourer of space.

How they managed to botch up her interior so that she moved unpushed is a mystery which Aristide, not divining, could not reveal; and when and where he himself learned to drive a motor-car is also vague. I believe the knowledge came by nature. He was a fellow of many weird accomplishments. He could conjure; he could model birds and beasts out of breadcrumb; he could play the drum—so well that he had a kettledrum hanging round his neck during most of his military service; he could make omelettes and rabbit-hutches; he could imitate any animal that ever emitted sound—a gift that endeared him to children; he could do almost anything you please—save stay in one place and acquire material possessions. The fact that he had never done a thing before was to him no proof of his inability to do it. In his superb self-confidence he would have undertaken to conduct the orchestra at Covent Garden or navigate a liner across the Atlantic. Knowing this, I cease to bother my head about so small a matter as the way in which he learned to drive a motor-car.

Behold him, then, one raw March morning, scuttering along the road that leads from Arles to Salon, in Provence. He wore a goat-skin coat and

a goat-skin cap drawn down well over his ears. His handsome bearded face, with its lustrous, laughing eyes, peeped out curiously human amid the circumambient shagginess. There was not a turn visible in the long, straight road that lost itself in the far distant mist; not a speck on it signifying cart or creature. Aristide Pujol gave himself up to the delirium of speed and urged the half-bursting engine to twenty miles an hour. In spite of the racing-track surface, the crazy car bumped and jolted; the sides of the rickety bonnet clashed like cymbals; every valve wheezed and squealed; every nut seemed to have got loose and terrifically clattered; rattling noises, grunting noises, screeching noises escaped from every part; it creaked and clanked like an over-insured tramp-steamer in a typhoon; it lurched as though afflicted with locomotor ataxy; and noisome vapours belched forth from the open exhaust-pipe as though the car were a Tophet on wheels. But all was music in the ears of Aristide. The car was going (it did not always go), the road scudded under him, and the morning air dashed stingingly into his face. For the moment he desired nothing more of life.

This road between Arles and Salon runs through one of the most desolate parts of France: a long, endless plain, about five miles broad, lying between two long low ranges of hills. It is strewn like a monstrous Golgotha, not with skulls, but with huge

smooth pebbles, as massed together as the shingle on a beach. Rank grass shoots up in what interstices it finds; but beyond this nothing grows. Nothing can grow. On a sunless day under a lowering sky it is a land accursed. Mile after mile for nearly twenty miles stretches this stony and barren waste. No human habitation cheers the sight, for from such a soil no human hand could wrest a sustenance. Only the rare traffic going from Arles to Salon and from Salon to Arles passes along the road. The cheery passing show of the live highway is wanting; there are no children, no dogs, no ducks and hens, no men and women lounging to their work; no red-trousered soldiers on bicycles, no blue-bloused, weather-beaten farmers jogging along in their little carts. As far as the eye can reach nothing suggestive of man meets the view. Nothing but the infinite barrenness of the plain, the ridges on either side, the long, straight, endless road cleaving through this abomination of desolation.

To walk through it would be a task as depressing as mortal could execute. But to the speed-drunken motorist it is a realization of dim and tremulous visions of Paradise. What need to look to right or left when you are swallowing up free mile after mile of dizzying road? Aristide looked neither to right nor left, and knew this was heaven at last.

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BETWEEN THE FOLDS OF THE BLANKET PEEPED THE FACE OF A SLEEPING CHILD

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Suddenly, however, he became aware of a small black spot far ahead in the very middle of the unencumbered track. As he drew near it looked like a great stone. He swerved as he passed it, and, looking, saw that it was a bundle wrapped in a striped blanket. It seemed so odd that it should be lying there that, his curiosity being aroused, he pulled up and walked back a few yards to examine it. The nearer he approached the less did it resemble an ordinary bundle. He bent down, and lo! between the folds of the blanket peeped the face of a sleeping child.

"Nom de Dieu!" cried Aristide. *"Nom de Dieu de nom de Dieu!"*

He ought not to have said it, but his astonishment was great. He stared at the baby, then up and down the road, then swept the horizon. Not a soul was visible. How did the baby get there? The heavens, according to history, have rained many things in their time: bread, quails, blood, frogs, and what not; but there is no mention of them ever having rained babies. It could not, therefore, have come from the clouds. It could not even have fallen from the tail of a cart, for then it would have been killed, or at least have broken its bones and generally been rendered a different baby from the sound, chubby mite sleeping as peacefully as though the Golgotha of Provence had been its cradle from birth. It could not have come there

accidentally. Deliberate hands had laid it down; in the centre of the road, too. Why not by the side, where it would have been out of the track of thundering automobiles? When the murderous intent became obvious Aristide shivered and felt sick. He breathed fierce and honest anathema on the heads of the bowelless fiends who had abandoned the babe to its doom. Then he stooped and picked up the bundle tenderly in his arms.

The wee face puckered for a moment and the wee limbs shot out vigorously; then the dark eyes opened and stared Aristide solemnly and wonderingly in the face. So must the infant Remus have first regarded his she-wolf mother. Having ascertained, however, that it was not going to be devoured, it began to cry lustily, showing two little white specks of teeth in the lower gum.

"*Mon pauvre petit,* you are hungry," said Aristide, carrying it to the car racked by the clattering engine. "I wonder when you last tasted food? If I only had a little biscuit and wine to give you; but, alas! there's nothing but petrol and corn-cure, neither of which, I believe, is good for babies. Wait, wait, *mon chèri,* until we get to Salon. There I promise you proper nourishment."

He danced the baby up and down in his arms and made half-remembered and insane noises, which eventually had the effect of reducing it to its original calm stare of wonderment.

"Voilà," said Aristide, delighted. "Now we can advance."

He deposited it on the vacant seat, clambered up behind the wheel, and started. But not at the break-neck speed of twenty miles an hour. He went slowly and carefully, his heart in his mouth at every lurch of the afflicted automobile, fearful lest the child should be precipitated from its slippery resting-place. But, alas! he did not proceed far. At the end of a kilometre the engine stopped dead. He leaped out to see what had happened, and, after a few perplexed and exhausting moments, remembered. He had not even petrol to offer to the baby, having omitted—most feather-headed of mortals—to fill up his tank before starting, and forgotten to bring a spare tin. There was nothing to be done save wait patiently until another motorist should pass by from whom he might purchase the necessary amount of essence to carry him on to Salon. Meanwhile the baby would go breakfastless. Aristide clambered back to his seat, took the child on his knees, and commiserated it profoundly. Sitting there on his apparently home-made vehicle, in the midst of the unearthly silence of the sullen and barren wilderness, attired in his shaggy goat-skin cap and coat, he resembled an up-to-date Robinson Crusoe dandling an infant Friday.

The disposal of the child at Salon would be simple. After having it fed and tended at an hotel,

he would make his deposition to the police, who would take it to the Enfants Trouvés, the department of State which provides fathers and mothers and happy homes for foundlings at a cost to the country of twenty-five francs a month per foundling. It is true that the parents so provided think more of the twenty-five francs than they do of the foundling. But that was the affair of the State, not of Aristide Pujol. In the meanwhile he examined the brat curiously. It was dressed in a coarse calico jumper, very unclean. The striped blanket was full of holes and smelled abominably. Some sort of toilet appeared essential. He got down and from his valise took what seemed necessary to the purpose. The jumper and blanket he threw far on the pebbly waste. The baby, stark naked for a few moments, crowed and laughed and stretched like a young animal, revealing itself to be a sturdy boy about nine months old. When he seemed fit to be clad Aristide tied him up in the lower part of a suit of pyjamas, cutting little holes in the sides for his tiny arms; and, further, with a view to cheating his hunger, provided him with a shoe-horn. The defenceless little head he managed to squeeze into the split mouth of a woollen sock. Aristide regarded him in triumph. The boy chuckled gleefully. Then Aristide folded him warm in his travelling-rug and entered into an animated conversation.

Now it happened that, at the most interesting point of the talk, the baby clutched Aristide's finger in his little brown hand. The tiny fingers clung strong.

A queer thrill ran through the impressionable man. The tiny fingers seemed to close round his heart. . . . It was a bonny, good-natured, gurgling scrap—and the pure eyes looked truthfully into his soul.

"Poor little wretch!" said Aristide, who, peasant's son that he was, knew what he was talking about. "Poor little wretch! If you go into the Enfants Trouvés you'll have a devil of a time of it."

The tiny clasp tightened. As if the babe understood, the chuckle died from his face.

"You'll be cuffed and kicked and half starved, while your adopted mother pockets her twenty-five francs a month, and you'll belong to nobody, and wonder why the deuce you're alive, and wish you were dead; and, if you remember to-day, you'll curse me for not having had the decency to run over you."

The clasp relaxed, puckers appeared at the corners of the dribbling mouth, and a myriad tiny horizontal lines of care marked the sock-capped brow.

"Poor little devil!" said Aristide. "My heart bleeds for you, especially now that you're dressed

in my sock and pyjama, and are sucking the only shoe-horn I ever possessed."

A welcome sound caused Aristide to leap into the middle of the road. He looked ahead, and there, in a cloud of dust, a thing like a torpedo came swooping down. He held up both his arms, the signal of a motorist in distress. The torpedo approached with slackened speed, and stopped. It was an evil-looking, drab, high-powered racer, and two bears with goggles sat in the midst thereof. The bear at the wheel raised his cap and asked courteously:—

"What can we do for you, monsieur?"

At that moment the baby broke into heart-rending cries. Aristide took off his goat-skin cap and, remaining uncovered, looked at the bear, then at the baby, then at the bear again.

"Monsieur," said he, "I suppose it's useless to ask you whether you have any milk and a feeding-bottle?"

"Mais dites donc!" shouted the bear, furiously, his hand on the brake. "Stop an automobile like this on such a pretext——?"

Aristide held up a protesting hand, and fixed the bear with the irresistible roguery of his eyes.

"Pardon, monsieur, I am also out of petrol. Forgive a father's feelings. The baby wants milk and I want petrol, and I don't know whose need is the more imperative. But if you could sell me

enough petrol to carry me to Salon I should be most grateful."

The request for petrol is not to be refused. To supply it, if possible, is the written law of motordom. The second bear slid from his seat and extracted a tin from the recesses of the torpedo, and stood by while Aristide filled his tank, a process that necessitated laying the baby on the ground. He smiled.

"You seem amused," said Aristide.

"Parbleu!" said the motorist. "You have at the back of your auto a placard telling people to cure their corns, and in front you carry a baby."

"That," replied Aristide, "is easily understood. I am the agent of the Maison Hiéropath of Marseilles, and the baby, whom I, its father, am carrying from a dead mother to an invalid aunt, I am using as an advertisement. As he luckily has no corns, I can exhibit his feet as a proof of the efficacy of the corn-cure."

The bear laughed and joined his companion, and the torpedo thundered away. Aristide replaced the baby, and with a complicated arrangement of string fastened it securely to the seat. The baby, having ceased crying, clutched his beard as he bent over, and "goo'd" pleasantly. The tug was at his heart-strings. How could he give so fascinating, so valiant a mite over to the Enfants Trouvés? Besides, it belonged to him. Had he not in jest claimed pa-

ternity? It had given him a new importance. He could say *"mon fils,"* just as he could say (with equal veracity) *"mon automobile."* A generous thrill ran through him. He burst into a loud laugh, clapped his hands, and danced before the delighted babe.

"Mon petit Jean," said he, with humorous tenderness, "for I suppose your name is Jean; I will rend myself in pieces before I let the Administration board you out among the wolves. You shall not go to the Enfants Trouvés. I myself will adopt you, *mon petit Jean.*"

As Aristide had no fixed abode whatever, the address on his visiting-card, "213 bis, Rue Saint-Honoré, Paris," being that of an old greengrocer woman of his acquaintance, with whom he lodged when he visited the metropolis, there was a certain amount of rashness in the undertaking. But when was Aristide otherwise than rash? Had prudence been his guiding principle through life he would not have been selling corn-cure for the Maison Hiéropath, and consequently would not have discovered the child at all.

In great delight at this satisfactory settlement of little Jean's destiny, he started the ramshackle engine and drove triumphantly on his way. Jean, fatigued by the emotions of the last half-hour, slumbered peacefully.

"The little angel!" said Aristide.

The sun was shining when they arrived at Salon, the gayest, the most coquettish, the most laughing little town in Provence. It is a place all trees and open spaces, and fountains and cafés, and sauntering people. The only thing grim about it is the solitary machicolated tower in the main street, the last vestige of ancient ramparts; and even that, close cuddled on each side by prosperous houses with shops beneath, looks like an old, old, wrinkled grandmother smiling amid her daintier grandchildren. Everyone seemed to be in the open air. Those who kept shops stood at the doorways. The prospect augured well for the Maison Hiéropath.

Aristide stopped before an hotel, disentangled Jean, to the mild interest of the passers-by, and, carrying him in, delivered him into the arms of the landlady.

"Madame," he said, "this is my son. I am taking him from his mother, who is dead, to an aunt who is an invalid. So he is alone on my hands. He is very hungry, and I beseech you to feed him at once."

The motherly woman received the babe instinctively and cast aside the travelling-rug in which he was enveloped. Then she nearly dropped him.

"Mon Dieu! Qu'est-ce que c'est que ça?"

She stared in stupefaction at the stocking-cap and at the long flannel pyjama legs that depended from the body of the infant, around whose neck

the waist was tightly drawn. Never since the world began had babe masqueraded in such attire. Aristide smiled his most engaging smile.

"My son's luggage has unfortunately been lost. His portmanteau, *pauvre petit,* was so small. A poor widower, I did what I could. I am but a mere man, madame."

"Evidently," said the woman, with some asperity.

Aristide took a louis from his purse. "If you will purchase him some necessary articles of costume while I fulfil my duties towards the Maison Hiéropath of Marseilles, which I represent, you will be doing me a kindness."

The landlady took the louis in a bewildered fashion. Allowing for the baby's portmanteau to have gone astray, what, she asked, had become of the clothes he must have been wearing? Aristide entered upon a picturesque and realistic explanation. The landlady was stout, she was stupid, she could not grasp the fantastic.

"Mon Dieu!" she said. "To think that there are Christians who dress their children like this!" She sighed exhaustively, and, holding the grotesque infant close to her breast, disappeared indignantly to administer the very greatly needed motherment.

Aristide breathed a sigh of relief, and after a well-earned *déjeuner* went forth with the car into the Place des Arbres and prepared to ply his trade.

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HE DEMONSTRATED THE PROPER APPLICATION OF THE CURE

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First he unfurled the Hiéropath banner, which floated proudly in the breeze. Then on a folding table he displayed his collection of ointment-boxes (together with pills and a toothache-killer which he sold on his own account) and a wax model of a human foot on which were grafted putty corns in every stage of callosity. As soon as half-a-dozen idlers collected he commenced his harangue. When their numbers increased he performed prodigies of chiropody on the putty corns, and demonstrated the proper application of the cure. He talked incessantly all the while. He has told me, in the grand manner, that this phase of his career was distasteful to him. But I scarcely believe it. If ever a man loved to talk, it was Aristide Pujol; and what profession, save that of an advocate, offers more occasion for wheedling loquacity than that of a public vendor of quack medicaments? As a matter of fact, he revelled in it. When he offered a free box of the cure to the first lady who confessed the need thereof, and a blushing wench came forward, the rascal revelled in the opportunity for badinage which set the good-humoured crowd in a roar. He loved to exert his half-mesmeric power. He had not the soul of a mountebank, for Aristide's soul had its high and generous dwelling-place; but he had the puckish swiftness and mischief of which the successful mountebank is made. And he was a success because he treated

it as an art, thinking nothing during its practice of the material gain, laughing whole-heartedly, like his great predecessor Tabarin of imperishable memory, and satisfying to the full his instinct for the dramatic. On the other hand, ever since he started life in the brass-buttoned shell-jacket of a *chasseur* in a Marseilles café, and dreamed dreams of the fairy-tale lives of the clients who came in accompanied by beautifully dressed ladies, he had social ambitions—and the social status of the mountebank is, to say the least of it, ambiguous. Ah me! What would man be without the unattainable?

Aristide pocketed his takings, struck his flag, dismantled his table, and visited the shops of Salon in the interests of the Maison Hiéropath. The day's work over, he returned to inquire for his supposititious offspring. The landlady, all smiles, presented him with a transmogrified Jean, cleansed and powdered, arrayed in the smug panoply of bourgeois babyhood. Shoes with a pompon adorned his feet, and a rakish cap decorated with white satin ribbons crowned his head. He also wore an embroidered frock and a pelisse trimmed with rabbit-fur. Jean grinned and dribbled self-consciously, and showed his two little teeth to the proudest father in the world. The landlady invited the happy parent into her little dark parlour beyond the office, and there exhibited a parcel containing garments and implements whose

use was a mystery to Aristide. She also demanded the greater part of another louis. Aristide began to learn that fatherhood is expensive. But what did it matter?

After all, here was a babe equipped to face the exigencies of a censorious world; in looks and apparel a credit to any father. As the afternoon was fine, and as it seemed a pity to waste satin and rabbit-fur on the murky interior of the hotel, Aristide borrowed a perambulator from the landlady, and, joyous as a schoolboy, wheeled the splendid infant through the sunny avenues of Salon.

That evening a bed was made up for the child in Aristide's room, which, until its master retired for the night, was haunted by the landlady, the chambermaids and all the kitchen wenches in the hotel. Aristide had to turn them out and lock his door.

"This is excellent," said he, apostrophizing the thoroughly fed, washed, and now sleeping child. "This is superb. As in every hotel there are women, and as every woman thinks she can be a much better mother than I, so in every hotel we visit we shall find a staff of trained and enthusiastic nurses. Jean, you will live like a little *coq en pâte.*"

The night passed amid various excursions on the part of Aristide and alarms on the part of Jean. Sometimes the child lay so still that Aristide arose to see whether he was alive. Sometimes he gave

such proofs of vitality that Aristide, in terror lest he should awaken the whole hotel, walked him about the room chanting lullabies. This was in accordance with Jean's views on luxury. He "goo'd" with joy. When Aristide put him back to bed he howled. Aristide snatched him up and he "goo'd" again. At last Aristide fed him desperately, dandled him eventually to sleep, and returned to an excited pillow. It is a fearsome thing for a man to be left alone in the dead of night with a young baby.

"I'll get used to it," said Aristide.

The next morning he purchased a basket, which he lashed ingeniously on the left-hand seat of the car, and a cushion, which he fitted into the basket. The berth prepared, he deposited the sumptuously-apparelled Jean therein and drove away, amid the perplexed benisons of the landlady and her satellites.

Thus began the oddest Odyssey on which ever mortals embarked. The man with the automobile, the corn-cure, and the baby grew to be legendary in the villages of Provence. When the days were fine, Jean in his basket assisted at the dramatic performance in the market-place. Becoming a magnet for the women, and being of a good-humoured and rollicking nature, he helped on the sale of the cure prodigiously. He earned his keep, as Aristide declared in exultation. Soon Aristide formed

IT IS A FEARSOME THING FOR A MAN TO BE LEFT ALONE IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT WITH A YOUNG BABY

a collection of his tricks and doings wherewith he would entertain the chance acquaintances of his vagabondage. To a permanent companion he would have grown insufferable. He invented him a career from the day of his birth, chronicled the coming of the first tooth, wept over the demise of the fictitious mother, and, in his imaginative way, convinced himself of his fatherhood. And every day the child crept deeper into the man's sunny heart.

Together they had many wanderings and many adventures. The wheezy, crazy mechanism of the car went to bits in unexpected places. They tobogganed down hills without a brake at the imminent peril of their lives. They suffered the indignity of being towed by wine-wagons. They spent hours by the wayside while Aristide took her to pieces and, sometimes with the help of a passing motorist, put her together again. Sometimes, too, an inn boasted no landlady, only a dishevelled and over-driven chambermaid, who refused to wash Jean. Aristide washed and powdered Jean himself, the landlord lounging by, pipe in mouth, administering suggestions. Once Jean grew ill, and Aristide in terror summoned the doctor, who told him that he had filled the child up with milk to bursting-point. Yet, in spite of heterogeneous nursing and exposure to sun and rain and piercing mistral, Jean throve exceedingly, and, to Aris-

tide's delight, began to cut another tooth. The vain man began to regard himself as an expert in denticulture.

At the end of a fairly-wide circuit, Aristide, with empty store-boxes and pleasantly-full pockets, arrived at the little town of Aix-en-Provence. He had arrived there not without difficulty. On the outskirts the car, which had been coaxed reluctantly along for many weary kilometres, had groaned, rattled, whirred, given a couple of convulsive leaps, and stood stock-still. This was one of her pretty ways. He was used to them, and hitherto he had been able to wheedle her into resumed motion. But this time, with all his cunning and perspiration, he could not induce another throb in the tired engines. A friendly motorist towed them to the Hôtel de Paris in the Cours Mirabeau. Having arranged for his room and given Jean in charge of the landlady, he procured some helping hands, and pushed the car to the nearest garage. There he gave orders for the car to be put into running condition for the following morning, and returned to the hotel.

He found Jean in the vestibule, sprawling sultanesquely on the landlady's lap, the centre of an admiring circle which consisted of two little girls in pigtails, an ancient peasant-woman, and two English ladies of obvious but graceful spinsterhood.

"Here is the father," said the landlady.

He had already explained Jean to the startled woman—landladies were always startled at Jean's unconventional advent. "Madame," he had said, according to rigid formula, "this is my son. I am taking him from his mother, who is dead, to an aunt who is an invalid, so he is alone on my hands. I beseech you to let some kind woman attend to his necessities."

There was no need for further explanation. Aristide, thus introduced, bowed politely, removed his Crusoe cap, and smiled luminously at the assembled women. They resumed their antiphonal chorus of worship. The brown, merry, friendly brat had something of Aristide's personal charm. He had a bubble and a "goo" for everyone. Aristide looked on in great delight. Jean was a son to be proud of.

"Ah! qu'il est fort—fort comme un Turc."

"Regardez ses dents."

"The darling thing!"

"Il est—oh, dear!—*il est ravissante!"*—with a disastrous plunge into gender.

"Tiens! il rit. C'est moi qui le fais rire."

"To think," said the younger Englishwoman to her sister, "of this wee mite travelling about in an open motor!"

"He's having the time of his life. He enjoys it as much as I do," said Aristide, in his excellent English.

The lady started. She was a well-bred, good-humoured woman in the early thirties, stout, with reddish hair, and irregular though comely features. Her sister was thin, faded, sandy, and kind-looking.

"I thought you were French," she said, apologetically.

"So I am," replied Aristide. "Provençal of Provence, Méridional of the Midi, Marseillais of Marseilles."

"But you talk English perfectly."

"I've lived in your beautiful country," said Aristide.

"You have the bonniest boy," said the elder lady. "How old is he?"

"Nine months, three weeks and a day," said Aristide, promptly.

The younger lady bent over the miraculous infant.

"Can I take him? *Est-ce que je puis*—oh, dear!" She turned a whimsical face to Aristide.

He translated. The landlady surrendered the babe. The lady danced him with the spinster's charming awkwardness, yet with instinctive feminine security, about the hall, while the little girls in pigtails, daughters of the house, followed like adoratory angels in an altar-piece, and the old peasant-woman looked benignly on, a myriad-wrinkled St. Elizabeth. Aristide had seen Jean dandled by doz-

ens of women during their brief comradeship; he had thought little of it, as it was the natural thing for women to do; but when this sweet English lady mothered Jean it seemed to matter a great deal. She lifted Jean and himself to a higher plane. Her touch was a consecration.

It was the hour of the day when infants of nine months should be washed and put to bed. The landlady, announcing the fact, held out her arms. Jean clung to his English nurse, who played the fascinating game of pretending to eat his hand. The landlady had not that accomplishment. She was dull and practical.

"Come and be washed," she said.

"Oh, do let me come, too," cried the English lady.

"Bien volontiers, mademoiselle," said the other. *"C'est par ici."*

The English lady held Jean out for the paternal good-night. Aristide kissed the child in her arms. The action brought about, for the moment, a curious and sweet intimacy.

"My sister is passionately fond of children," said the elder lady, in smiling apology.

"And you?"

"I, too. But Anne—my sister—will not let me have a chance when she is by."

After dinner Aristide went up, as usual, to his room to see that Jean was alive, painless, and asleep.

Finding him awake, he sat by his side and, with the earnestness of a nursery-maid, patted him off to slumber. Then he crept out on tiptoe and went downstairs. Outside the hotel he came upon the two sisters sitting on a bench and drinking coffee. The night was fine, the terraces of the neighbouring cafés were filled with people, and all the life of Aix not at the cafés promenaded up and down the wide and pleasant avenue. The ladies smiled. How was the boy? He gave the latest news. Permission to join them at their coffee was graciously given. A waiter brought a chair and he sat down. Conversation drifted from the baby to general topics. The ladies told the simple story of their tour. They had been to Nice and Marseilles, and they were going on the next day to Avignon. They also told their name—Honeywood. He gathered that the elder was Janet, the younger Anne. They lived at Chislehurst when they were in England, and often came up to London to attend the Queen's Hall concerts and the dramatic performances at His Majesty's Theatre. As guileless, though as self-reliant, gentlewomen as sequestered England could produce. Aristide, impressionable and responsive, fell at once into the key of their talk. He has told me that their society produced on him the effect of the cool hands of saints against his cheek.

At last the conversation inevitably returned to

Jean. The landlady had related the tragic history of the dead mother and the invalid aunt. They deplored the orphaned state of the precious babe. For he was precious, they declared. Miss Anne had taken him to her heart.

"If only you had seen him in his bath, Janet!"

She turned to Aristide. "I'm afraid," she said, very softly, hesitating a little—"I'm afraid this must be a sad journey for you."

He made a wry mouth. The sympathy was so sincere, so womanly. That which was generous in him revolted against acceptance.

"Mademoiselle," said he, "I can play a farce with landladies—it happens to be convenient—in fact, necessary. But with you—no. You are different. Jean is not my child, and who his parents are I've not the remotest idea."

"Not your child?" They looked at him incredulously.

"I will tell you—in confidence," said he.

Jean's history was related in all its picturesque details; the horrors of the life of an *enfant trouvé* luridly depicted. The sisters listened with tears in their foolish eyes. Behind the tears Anne's grew bright. When he had finished she stretched out her hand impulsively.

"Oh, I call it splendid of you!"

He took the hand and, in his graceful French fashion, touched it with his lips. She flushed, hav-

ing expected, in her English way, that he would grasp it.

"Your commendation, mademoiselle, is sweet to hear," said he.

"I hope he will grow up to be a true comfort to you, M. Pujol," said Miss Janet.

"I can understand a woman doing what you've done, but scarcely a man," said Miss Anne.

"But, dear mademoiselle," cried Aristide, with a large gesture, "cannot a man have his heart touched, his—his—*ses entrailles, enfin*—stirred by baby fingers? Why should love of the helpless and the innocent be denied him?"

"Why, indeed?" said Miss Janet.

Miss Anne said, humbly: "I only meant that your devotion to Jean was all the more beautiful, M. Pujol."

Soon after this they parted, the night air having grown chill. Both ladies shook hands with him warmly.

Anne's hand lingered the fraction of a second longer in his than Janet's. She had seen Jean in his bath.

Aristide wandered down the gay avenue into the open road and looked at the stars, reading in their splendour a brilliant destiny for Jean. He felt, in his sensitive way, that the two sweet-souled Englishwomen had deepened and sanctified his love for Jean. When he returned to the hotel he kissed his

incongruous room-mate with the gentleness of a woman.

In the morning he went round to the garage. The foreman mechanician advanced to meet him.

"Well?"

"There is nothing to be done, monsieur."

"What do you mean by 'nothing to be done'?" asked Aristide.

The other shrugged his sturdy shoulders.

"She is worn out. She needs new carburation, new cylinders, new water-circulation, new lubrication, new valves, new brakes, new ignition, new gears, new bolts, new nuts, new everything. In short, she is not repairable."

Aristide listened in incredulous amazement. His automobile, his wonderful, beautiful, clashing, dashing automobile unrepairable! It was impossible. But a quarter of an hour's demonstration by the foreman convinced him. The car was dead. The engine would never whir again. All the petrol in the world would not stimulate her into life. Never again would he sit behind that wheel rejoicing in the insolence of speed. The car, which, in spite of her manifold infirmities, he had fondly imagined to be immortal, had run her last course. Aristide felt faint.

"And there is nothing to be done?"

"Nothing, monsieur. Fifty francs is all that she is worth."

"At any rate," said Aristide, "send the basket to the Hôtel de Paris."

He went out of the garage like a man in a dream. At the door he turned to take a last look at the Pride of his Life. Her stern was towards him, and all he saw of her was the ironical legend, "Cure your Corns."

At the hotel he found the bench outside occupied chiefly by Jean. One of the little girls in pigtails was holding him, while Miss Anne administered the feeding-bottle. Provincial France is the happiest country in the world—in that you can live your intimate, domestic life in public, and nobody heeds.

"I hope you've not come to tell Jean to boot and saddle," said Miss Anne, a smile on her roughly-hewn, comely face.

"Alas!" said Aristide, cheered by the charming spectacle before him. "I don't know when we can get away. My auto has broken down hopelessly. I ought to go at once to my firm in Marseilles"—he spoke as if he were a partner in the Maison Hiéropath—"but I don't quite know what to do with Jean."

"Oh, I'll look after Jean."

"But you said you were leaving for Avignon to-day."

She laughed, holding the feeding-bottle. "The Palace of the Popes has been standing for six cen-

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ONE OF THE LITTLE GIRLS IN PIGTAILS WAS HOLDING HIM, WHILE MISS ANNE ADMINISTERED THE FEEDING-BOTTLE

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turies, and it will be still standing to-morrow; whereas Jean——" Here Jean, for some reason known to himself, grinned wet and wide. "Isn't he the most fascinating thing of the twentieth century?" she cried, logically inconsequential, like most of her sex. "You go to Marseilles, M. Pujol."

So Aristide took the train to Marseilles—a half-hour's journey—and in a quarter of the city resembling a fusion of Jarrow, an unfashionable part of St. Louis, and a brimstone-manufacturing suburb of Gehenna, he interviewed the high authorities of the Maison Hiéropath. His cajolery could lead men into diverse lunacies, but it could not induce the hard-bitten manufacturer of quack remedies to provide a brand-new automobile for his personal convenience. The old auto had broken down. The manufacturer shrugged his shoulders. The mystery was that it had lasted as long as it did. He had expected it to explode the first day. The idea had originally been that of the junior partner, a scatter-brained youth whom at times they humoured. Meanwhile, there being no beplacarded and beflagged automobile, there could be no advertisement; therefore they had no further use for M. Pujol's services.

"Good," said Aristide, when he reached the evil thoroughfare. "It was a degraded occupation, and I am glad I am out of it. Meanwhile, here is

Marseilles before me, and it will be astonishing if I do not find some fresh road to fortune before the day is out."

Aristide tramped and tramped all day through the streets of Marseilles, but the road he sought he did not find. He returned to Aix in dire perplexity. He was used to finding himself suddenly cut off from the means of livelihood. It was his chronic state of being. His gay resourcefulness had always carried him through. But then there had been only himself to think of. Now there was Jean. For the first time for many years the dragon-fly's wings grew limp. Jean—what could he do with Jean?

Jean had already gone to sleep when he arrived. All day he had been as good as gold, so Miss Anne declared. For herself, she had spent the happiest day of her life.

"I don't wonder at your being devoted to him, M. Pujol," she said. "He has the most loving ways of any baby I ever met."

"Yes, mademoiselle," replied Aristide, with an unaccustomed huskiness in his voice, "I am devoted to him. It may seem odd for a man to be wrapped up in a baby of nine months old—but—it's like that. It's true. *Je l'adore de tout mon cœur, de tout mon être,*" he cried, in a sudden gust of passion.

Miss Anne smiled kindly, not dreaming of his

perplexity, amused by his Southern warmth. Miss Janet joined them in the hall. They went in to dinner, Aristide sitting at the central *table d'hôte,* the ladies at a little table by themselves. After dinner they met again outside the hotel, and drank coffee and talked the evening away. He was not as bright a companion as on the night before. His gaiety was forced. He talked about everything else in the world but Jean. The temptation to pour his financial troubles into the sympathetic ears of these two dear women he resisted. They regarded him as on a social equality, as a man of means engaged in some sort of business at Marseilles; they had invited him to bring Jean to see them at Chislehurst when he should happen to be in England again. Pride forbade him to confess himself a homeless, penniless vagabond. The exquisite charm of their frank intimacy would be broken. Besides, what could they do?

They retired early. Aristide again sought the message of the stars; but the sky was clouded over, and soon a fine rain began to fall. A bock at a café brought him neither comfort nor inspiration. He returned to the hotel, and, eluding a gossip-seeking landlady, went up to his room.

What could be done? Neither the sleeping babe nor himself could offer any suggestion. One thing was grimly inevitable. He and Jean must part. To carry him about like an infant prince in an

automobile had, after all, been a simple matter; to drag him through Heaven knew what hardships in his makeshift existence was impossible. In his childlike, impulsive fashion he had not thought of the future when he adopted Jean. Aristide always regarded the fortune of the moment as if it would last forever. Past deceptions never affected his incurable optimism. Now Jean and he must part. Aristide felt that the end of the world had come. His pacing to and fro awoke the child, who demanded, in his own way, the soothing rocking of his father's arms. There he bubbled and "goo'd" till Aristide's heart nearly broke.

"What can I do with you, *mon petit Jean?*"

The Enfants Trouvés, after all? He thought of it with a shudder.

The child asleep again, he laid it on its bed, and then sat far into the night thinking barrenly. At last one of his sudden gleams of inspiration illuminated his mind. It was the only way. He took out his watch. It was four o'clock. What had to be done must be done swiftly.

In the travelling-basket, which had been sent from the garage, he placed a pillow, and on to the pillow he transferred with breathless care the sleeping Jean, and wrapped him up snug and warm in bedclothes. Then he folded the tiny day-garments that lay on a chair, collected the little odds and ends belonging to the child, took from his valise the rest

of Jean's little wardrobe, and laid them at the foot of the basket. The most miserable man in France then counted up his money, divided it into two parts, and wrote a hasty letter, which, with the bundle of notes, he enclosed in an envelope.

"My little Jean," said he, laying the envelope on the child's breast. "Here is a little more than half my fortune. Half is for yourself and the little more to pay your wretched father's hotel bill. Good-bye, my little Jean. *Je t'aime bien, tu sais*— and don't reproach me."

About an hour afterwards Miss Anne awoke and listened, and in a moment or two Miss Janet awoke also.

"Janet, do you hear that?"

"It's a child crying. It's just outside the door."

"It sounds like Jean."

"Nonsense, my dear!"

But Anne switched on the light and went to see for herself; and there, in the tiny anteroom that separated the bedroom from the corridor, she found the basket—a new Pharoah's daughter before a new little Moses in the bulrushes. In bewilderment she brought the ark into the room, and read the letter addressed to Janet and herself. She burst into tears. All she said was:—

"Oh, Janet, why couldn't he have told us?"

And then she fell to hugging the child to her bosom.

Meanwhile Aristide Pujol, clad in his goatskin cap and coat, valise in hand, was plodding through the rain in search of the elusive phantom, Fortune; gloriously certain that he had assured Jean's future, yet with such a heartache as he had never had in his life before.

V

THE ADVENTURE OF THE PIG'S HEAD

ONCE upon a time Aristide Pujol found himself standing outside his Paris residence, No. 213 *bis,* Rue Saint Honoré, without a penny in the world. His last sou had gone to Madame Bidoux, who kept a small green grocer's shop at No. 213 *bis* and rented a ridiculously small back room for a ridiculously small weekly sum to Aristide whenever he honoured the French capital with his presence. During his absence she forwarded him such letters as might arrive for him; and as this was his only permanent address, and as he let Madame Bidoux know his whereabouts only at vague intervals of time, the transaction of business with Aristide Pujol, "Agent, No. 213 *bis,* Rue Saint Honoré, Paris," by correspondence was peculiarly difficult.

He had made Madame Bidoux's acquaintance in the dim past; and he had made it in his usual direct and electric manner. Happening to walk down the Rue Saint Honoré, he had come upon tragedy. Madame Bidoux, fat, red of face, tearful of eye

and strident of voice, held in her arms a little mongrel dog—her own precious possession—which had just been run over in the street, and the two of them filled the air with wailings and vociferation. Aristide uncovered his head, as though he were about to address a duchess, and smiled at her engagingly.

"Madame," said he, "I perceive that your little dog has a broken leg. As I know all about dogs, I will, with your permission, set the limb, put it into splints and guarantee a perfect cure. Needless to say, I make no charge for my services."

Snatching the dog from the arms of the fascinated woman, he darted in his dragon-fly fashion into the shop, gave a hundred orders to a stupefied assistant, and—to cut short a story which Aristide told me with great wealth of detail—mended the precious dog and gained Madame Bidoux's eternal gratitude. For Madame Bidoux the world held no more remarkable man than Aristide Pujol; and for Aristide the world held no more devoted friend than Madame Bidoux. Many a succulent meal, at the widow's expense—never more enjoyable than in summer time when she set a little iron table and a couple of iron chairs on the pavement outside the shop—had saved him from starvation; and many a gewgaw sent from London or Marseilles or other such remote latitudes filled her heart with pride. Since my acquaintance with Aristide I myself have

called on this excellent woman, and I hope I have won her esteem, though I have never had the honour of eating pig's trotters and chou-croûte with her on the pavement of the Rue Saint Honoré. It is an honour from which, being an unassuming man, I shrink.

Unfortunately Madame Bidoux has nothing further to do with the story I am about to relate, save in one respect:—

There came a day—it was a bleak day in November, when Madame Bidoux's temporary financial difficulties happened to coincide with Aristide's. To him, unsuspicious of coincidence, she confided her troubles. He emptied the meagre contents of his purse into her hand.

"Madame Bidoux," said he with a flourish, and the air of a prince, "why didn't you tell me before?" and without waiting for her blessing he went out penniless into the street.

Aristide was never happier than when he had not a penny piece in the world. He believed, I fancy, in a dim sort of way, in God and the Virgin and Holy Water and the Pope; but the faith that thrilled him to exaltation was his faith in the inevitable happening of the unexpected. He marched to meet it with the throbbing pulses of a soldier rushing to victory or a saint to martyrdom. He walked up the Rue Saint Honoré, the Rue de la Paix, along the Grands Boulevards, smiling on a

world which teemed with unexpectednesses, until he reached a café on the Boulevard des Bonnes Filles de Calvaire. Here he was arrested by Fate, in the form of a battered man in black, who, springing from the solitary frostiness of the terrace, threw his arms about him and kissed him on both cheeks.

"Mais, c'est toi, Pujol!"

"C'est toi, Roulard!"

Roulard dragged Aristide to his frosty table and ordered drinks. Roulard had played the trumpet in the regimental band in which Aristide had played the kettle drum. During their military service they had been inseparables. Since those happy and ear-splitting days they had not met. They looked at each other and laughed and thumped each other's shoulders.

"Ce vieux Roulard!"

"Ce sacré Pujol."

"And what are you doing?" asked Aristide, after the first explosions of astonishment and reminiscence.

A cloud overspread the battered man's features. He had a wife and five children and played in theatre orchestras. At the present time he was trombone in the "Tournée Gulland," a touring opera company. It was not gay for a sensitive artist like him, and the trombone gave one a thirst which it took half a week's salary to satisfy. *Mais enfin, que veux-tu?* It was life, a dog's life, but life was

like that. Aristide, he supposed, was making a fortune. Aristide threw back his head, and laughed at the exquisite humour of the hypothesis, and gaily disclosed his Micawberish situation. Roulard sat for a while thoughtful and silent. Presently a ray of inspiration dispelled the cloud from the features of the battered man.

"Tiens, mon vieux," said he, "I have an idea."

It was an idea worthy of Aristide's consideration. The drum of the Tournée Gulland had been dismissed for drunkenness. The vacancy had not been filled. Various executants who had drummed on approval—this being an out-week of the tour—had driven the chef d'orchestre to the verge of homicidal mania. Why should not Aristide, past master in drumming, find an honourable position in the orchestra of the Tournée Gulland?

Aristide's eyes sparkled, his fingers itched for the drumsticks, he started to his feet.

"Mon vieux Roulard!" he cried, "you have saved my life. More than that, you have resuscitated an artist. Yes, an artist. *Sacré nom de Dieu!* Take me to this chef d'orchestre."

So Roulard, when the hour of rehearsal drew nigh, conducted Aristide to the murky recesses of a dirty little theatre in the Batignolles, where Aristide performed such prodigies of repercussion that he was forthwith engaged to play the drum, the kettle-drum, the triangle, the cymbals, the castag-

nettes and the tambourine, in the orchestra of the Tournée Gulland at the dazzling salary of thirty francs a week.

To tell how Aristide drummed and cymballed the progress of Les Huguenots, Carmen, La Juive, La Fille de Madame Angot and L'Arlésienne through France would mean the rewriting of a "Capitaine Fracasse." To hear the creature talk about it makes my mouth as a brick kiln and my flesh as that of a goose. He was the Adonis, the Apollo, the Don Juan, the Irresistible of the Tournée. Fled truculent bass and haughty tenor before him; from diva to moustachioed contralto in the chorus, all the ladies breathlessly watched for the fall of his handkerchief; he was recognized, in fact, as a devil of a fellow. But in spite of these triumphs, the manipulation of the drum, kettle-drum, triangle, cymbals, castagnettes and tambourine, which at first had given him intense and childish delight, at last became invested with a mechanical monotony that almost drove him mad. All day long the thought of the ill-lit corner, on the extreme right of the orchestra, garnished with the accursed instruments of noise to which duty would compel him at eight o'clock in the evening hung over him like a hideous doom. Sweet singers of the female sex were powerless to console. He passed them by, and haughty tenor and swaggering basso again took heart of grace.

"Mais, mon Dieu, c'est le métier!" expostulated Roulard.

"Sale métier!" cried Aristide, who was as much fitted for the merciless routine of a theatre orchestra as a quagga for the shafts of an omnibus. "A beast of a trade! One is no longer a man. One is just an automatic system of fog-signals!"

In this depraved state of mind he arrived at Perpignan, where that befel him which I am about to relate.

Now, Perpignan is the last town of France on the Gulf of Lions, a few miles from the Spanish border. From it you can see the great white monster of Le Canigou, the pride of the Eastern Pyrenees, far, far away, blocking up the valley of the Tet, which flows sluggishly past the little town. The Quai Sadi-Carnot (is there a provincial town in France which has not a *something* Sadi-Carnot in it?) is on the left bank of the Tet; at one end is the modern Place Arago, at the other Le Castillet, a round, castellated red-brick fortress with curiously long and deep machicolations of the 14th century with some modern additions of Louis XI, who also built the adjoining Porte Notre Dame which gives access to the city. Between the Castillet and the Place Arago, the Quai Sadi-Carnot is the site of the Prefecture, the Grand Hôtel, various villas and other resorts of the aristocracy. Any little street off it will lead you into the seeth-

ing centre of Perpignan life—the Place de la Loge, which is a great block of old buildings surrounded on its four sides by narrow streets of shops, cafés, private houses, all with balconies and jalousies, all cramped, crumbling, Spanish, picturesque. The oldest of this conglomerate block is a corner building, the Loge de Mer, a thirteenth century palace, the cloth exchange in the glorious days when Perpignan was a seaport and its merchant princes traded with Sultans and Doges and such-like magnificoes of the Mediterranean. But nowadays its glory has departed. Below the great gothic windows spreads the awning of a café, which takes up all the ground floor. Hugging it tight is the Mairie, and hugging that, the Hôtel de Ville. Hither does every soul in the place, at some hour or other of the day, inevitably gravitate. Lawyers and clients, doctors and patients, merchants, lovers, soldiers, market-women, loafers, horses, dogs, wagons, all crowd in a noisy medley the narrow cobble-paved streets around the Loge. Of course there are other streets, tortuous, odorous and cool, intersecting the old town, and there are various open spaces, one of which is the broad market square on one side flanked by the Théâtre Municipal.

From the theatre Aristide Pujol issued one morning after rehearsal, and, leaving his colleagues, including the ever-thirsty Roulard, to refresh them-

selves at a humble café hard by, went forth in search of distraction. He idled about the Place de la Loge, passed the time of day with a café waiter until the latter, with a disconcerting *"Voila! Voila!"* darted off to attend to a customer, and then strolled through the Porte Notre Dame onto the Quai Sadi-Carnot. There a familiar sound met his ears—the roll of a drum followed by an incantation in a quavering, high-pitched voice. It was the Town Crier, with whom, as with a brother artist, he had picked acquaintance the day before.

They met by the parapet of the Quai, just as Père Bracasse had come to the end of his incantation. The old man, grizzled, tanned and seamed, leant weakly against the parapet.

"How goes it, Père Bracasse?"

"Alas, mon bon Monsieur, it goes from bad to worse," sighed the old man. "I am at the end of my strength. My voice has gone and the accursed rheumatism in my shoulder gives me atrocious pain whenever I beat the drum."

"How much more of your round have you to go?" asked Aristide.

"I have only just begun," said Père Bracasse.

The Southern sun shone from a cloudless sky; a light, keen wind blowing from the distant snow-clad Canigou set the blood tingling. A lunatic idea flashed through Aristide's mind. He whipped the drum strap over the old man's head.

"Père Bracasse," said he, "you are suffering from rheumatism, bronchitis, fever and corns, and you must go home to bed. I will finish your round for you. Listen," and he beat such a tattoo as Père Bracasse had never accomplished in his life. "Where are your words?"

The old man, too weary to resist and fascinated by Aristide's laughing eyes, handed him a dirty piece of paper. Aristide read, played a magnificent roll and proclaimed in a clarion voice that a gold bracelet having been lost on Sunday afternoon in the Avenue des Platanes, whoever would deposit it at the Mairie would receive a reward.

"That's all?" he enquired.

"That's all," said Père Bracasse. "I live in the Rue Petite-de-la-Réal, No. 4, and you will bring me back the drum when you have finished."

Aristide darted off like a dragon-fly in the sunshine, as happy as a child with a new toy. Here he could play the drum to his heart's content with no score or conductor's bâton to worry him. He was also the one and only personage in the drama, concentrating on himself the attention of the audience. He pitied poor Roulard, who could never have such an opportunity with his trombone. . . .

The effect of his drumming before the Café de la Loge was electric. Shopkeepers ran out of their shops, housewives craned over their balconies to

listen to him. By the time he had threaded the busy strip of the town and emerged on to the Place Arago he had collected an admiring train of urchins. On the Place Arago he halted on the fringe of a crowd surrounding a cheap-jack whose vociferations he drowned in a roll of thunder. He drummed and drummed till he became the centre of the throng. Then he proclaimed the bracelet. He had not enjoyed himself so much since he left Paris.

He was striding away, merry-eyed and happy, followed by his satellites when a prosperous-looking gentleman with a very red face, a prosperous roll of fat above the back of his collar, and the ribbon of the Legion of Honour in his button-hole, descending the steps of the great glass-covered café commanding the Place, hurried up and laid his finger on his arm.

"Pardon, my friend," said he, "what are you doing there?"

"You shall hear, monsieur," replied Aristide, clutching the drumsticks.

"For the love of Heaven!" cried the other hastily interrupting. "Tell me what are you doing?"

"I am crying the loss of a bracelet, monsieur!"

"But who are you?"

"I am Aristide Pujol, and I play the drum, kettle-drum, triangle, cymbals, castagnettes and

tambourine in the orchestra of the Tournée Gulland. And now, in my turn, may I ask to whom I have the honour of speaking?"

"I am the Mayor of Perpignan."

Aristide raised his hat politely. "I hope to have the pleasure," said he, "of Monsieur le Maire's better acquaintance."

The Mayor, attracted by the rascal's guileless mockery, laughed.

"You will, my friend, if you go on playing that drum. You are not the Town Crier."

Aristide explained. Père Bracasse was ill, suffering from rheumatism, bronchitis, fever and corns. He was replacing him. The Mayor retorted that Père Bracasse being a municipal functionary could not transmit his functions except through the Administration. Monsieur Pujol must desist from drumming and crying. Aristide bowed to authority and unstrung his drum.

"But I was enjoying myself so much, Monsieur le Maire. You have spoiled my day," said he.

The Mayor laughed again. There was an irresistible charm and roguishness about the fellow, with his intelligent oval face, black Vandyke beard and magically luminous eyes.

"I should have thought you had enough of drums in your orchestra."

"Ah! there I am cramped!" cried Aristide. "I have it in horror, in detestation. Here I am free.

I can give vent to all the aspirations of my soul!"

The Mayor mechanically moved from the spot where they had been standing. Aristide, embroidering his theme, mechanically accompanied him; and, such is democratic France, and also such was the magnetic, Ancient Mariner-like power of Aristide—did not I, myself, on my first meeting with him at Aigues-Mortes fall helplessly under the spell—that, in a few moments, the amateur Town Crier and the Mayor were walking together, side by side, along the Quai Sadi-Carnot, engaged in amiable converse. Aristide told the Mayor the story of his life—or such incidents of it as were meet for Mayoral ears—and when they parted—the Mayor to lunch, Aristide to yield up the interdicted drum to Père Bracasse—they shook hands warmly and mutually expressed the wish that they would soon meet again.

They met again; Aristide saw to that. They met again that very afternoon in the café on the Place Arago. When Aristide entered he saw the Mayor seated at a table in the company of another prosperous, red-ribboned gentleman. Aristide saluted politely and addressed the Mayor. The Mayor saluted and presented him to Monsieur Quérin, the President of the Syndicat d'Initiative of the town of Perpignan. Monsieur Quérin saluted and declared himself enchanted at the encounter. Aris-

tide stood gossiping until the Mayor invited him to take a place at the table and consume liquid refreshment. Aristide glowingly accepted the invitation and cast a look of triumph around the café. Not to all mortals is it given to be the boon companion of a Mayor and a President of the Syndicat d'Initiative!

Then ensued a conversation momentous in its consequences.

The Syndicat d'Initiative is a semi-official body existing in most provincial towns in France for the purpose of organising public festivals for the citizens and developing the resources and possibilities of the town for the general amenity of visitors. Now Perpignan is as picturesque, as sun-smitten and, in spite of the icy tramontana, even as joyous a place as tourist could desire; and the Carnival of Perpignan, as a spontaneous outburst of gaiety and pageantry, is unique in France. But Perpignan being at the end of everywhere and leading nowhere attracts very few visitors. Biarritz is on the Atlantic coast at the other end of the Pyrenees; Hyères, Cannes and Monte Carlo on the other side of the Gulf of Lions. No English or Americans—the only visitors of any account in the philosophy of provincial France—flock to Perpignan. This was a melancholy fact bewailed by Monsieur Quérin. The town was perishing from lack of Anglo-Saxon support. Monsieur Coquereau,

the Mayor, agreed. If the English and Americans came in their hordes to this paradise of mimosa, fourteenth century architecture, sunshine and unique Carnival, the fortunes of all the citizens would be assured. Perpignan would out-rival Nice. But what could be done?

"Advertise it," said Aristide. "Flood the English-speaking world with poetical descriptions of the place. Build a row of palatial hotels in the new part of the town. It is not known to the Anglo-Saxons."

"How can you be certain of that?" asked Monsieur Quérin.

"*Parbleu!*" he cried, with a wide gesture. "I have known the English all my life. I speak their language as I speak French or my native Provençal. I have taught in schools in England. I know the country and the people like my pocket. They have never heard of Perpignan."

His companions acquiesced sadly. Aristide, aglow with a sudden impudent inspiration, leant across the marble table.

"Monsieur le Maire and Monsieur le Président du Syndicat d'Initiative, I am sick to death of playing the drum, the kettle-drum, the triangle, the cymbals, the castagnettes and the tambourine in the Tournée Gulland. I was born to higher things. Entrust to me"—he converged the finger-tips of both hands to his bosom—"to me, Aristide Pujol,

the organisation of Perpignan-Ville de Plaisir, and you will not regret it."

The Mayor and the President laughed.

But my astonishing friend prevailed—not indeed to the extent of being appointed a Petronius, *arbiter élegantiarum,* of the town of Perpignan; but to the extent of being employed, I fear in a subordinate capacity, by the Mayor and the Syndicat in the work of propagandism. The Tournée Gulland found another drum and went its tuneful but weary way; and Aristide remained gloriously behind and rubbed his hands with glee. At last he had found permanence in a life where heretofore had been naught but transience. At last he had found a sphere worthy of his genius. He began to nourish insensate ambitions. He would be the Great Benefactor of Perpignan. All Roussillon should bless his name. Already he saw his statue on the Quai Sadi-Carnot.

His rise in the social scale of the town was meteoric, chiefly owing to the goodwill of Madame Coquereau, the widowed mother of the Mayor. She was a hard-featured old lady, with a face that might have been made of corrugated iron painted yellow and with the eyes of an old hawk. She dressed always in black, was very devout and rich and narrow and iron-willed. Aristide was presented to her one Sunday afternoon at the Café on the

Place Arago—where on Sunday afternoons all the fashion of Perpignan assembles—and—need I say it?—she fell at once a helpless victim to his fascination. Accompanying her grandmother was Mademoiselle Stéphanie Coquereau, the Mayor's niece (a wealthy orphan, as Aristide soon learned), nineteen, pretty, demure, perfectly brought up, who said *"Oui, Monsieur"* and *"Non, Monsieur"* with that quintessence of modest grace which only a provincial French Convent can cultivate.

Aristide's heart left his body and rolled at the feet of Mademoiselle Stéphanie. It was a way with Aristide's heart. It was always doing that. He was of Provence and not of Peckham Rye or Hoboken, and he could not help it.

Aristide called on Madame Coquereau, who entertained him with sweet Frontignan wine, dry sponge cakes and conversation. After a while he was invited to dinner. In a short space of time he became the intimate friend of the house, and played piquet with Madame Coquereau, and grew familiar with the family secrets. First he learned that Mademoiselle Stéphanie would go to a husband with two hundred and fifty thousand francs. Aristide's heart panted at the feet of Mademoiselle Stéphanie. Further he gathered that, though Monsieur Coquereau was a personage of great dignity and importance in civic affairs, he was as but a little child in his own house. Madame Coquereau held

the money-bags. Her son had but little personal fortune. He had reached the age of forty-five without being able to marry. Marriage unauthorized by Madame Coquereau meant immediate poverty and the testamentary assignment of Madame Coquereau's fortune to various religious establishments. None of the objects of Monsieur Coquereau's matrimonial desire had pleased Madame Coquereau, and none of Madame Coquereau's blushing candidates had caused a pulse in Monsieur Coquereau's being to beat the faster. The Mayor held his mother in professed adoration and holy terror. She held him in abject subjection. Aristide became the confidant, in turn, of Madame's sour philosophy of life and of Monsieur's impotence and despair. As for Mademoiselle Stéphanie, she kept on saying *"Oui, Monsieur"* and *"Non, Monsieur,"* in a crescendo of maddening demureness.

So passed the halcyon hours. During the day time Aristide in a corner of the Mayor's office, drew up flamboyant circulars in English which would have put a pushing Land and Estate Agent in the New Jerusalem to the blush, and in the evening played piquet with Madame Coquereau, while Mademoiselle Stéphanie, model of modest piety, worked pure but nameless birds and flowers on her embroidery frame. Monsieur le Maire, of course, played his game of manilla at the café, after din-

ner, and generally came home just before Aristide took his leave. If it had not been for the presence of Mademoiselle Stéphanie, it would not have been gay for Aristide. But love gilded the moments.

On the first evening of the Carnival, which lasts nearly a fortnight in Perpignan, Aristide, in spite of a sweeter *"Oui, Monsieur"* than ever from Mademoiselle Stéphanie, made an excuse to slip away rather earlier than usual, and, front door having closed behind him, crossed the strip of gravel with a quick step and flung out of the iron gates. Now the house had an isolated position in the new quarter of the town. It was perky and modern and defaced by all sorts of oriel windows and tourelles and pinnacles which gave it a top-heavy appearance, and it was surrounded by a low brick wall. Aristide, on emerging through the iron gates, heard the sound of scurrying footsteps on the side of the wall nearest to the town, and reached the corner, just in time to see a masquer, attired in a Pierrot costume and wearing what seemed to be a pig's head, disappear round the further angle. Paying no heed to this phenomenon, Aristide lit a cigarette and walked, in anticipation of enjoyment, to the great Avenue des Plantanes where the revelry of the Carnival was being held. Aristide was young, he loved flirtation, and flirtation flourished in the Avenue des Plantanes.

The next morning the Mayor entered his office with a very grave face.

"Do you know what has happened? My house was broken into last night. The safe in my study was forced open, and three thousand francs and some valuable jewelry were stolen. *"Quel malheur!"* he cried, throwing himself into a chair, and wiping his forehead. "It is not I who can afford to lose three thousand francs at once. If they had robbed *maman* it would have been a different matter."

Aristide expressed his sympathy.

"Whom do you suspect?" he asked.

"A robber, *parbleu!"* said the Mayor. "The police are even now making their investigations."

The door opened and a plain clothes detective entered the office.

"Monsieur le Maire," said he, with an air of triumph, "I know a burglar."

Both men leapt to their feet.

"Ah!" said Aristide.

"A la bonne heure!" cried the Mayor.

"Arrest him at once," said Aristide.

"Alas, Monsieur," said the detective, "that I cannot do. I have called on him this morning and his wife tells me that he left for the North yesterday afternoon. But it is José Puégas that did it. I know his ways."

"Tiens!" said the Mayor, reflectively. "I know him also, an evil fellow."

"But why are you not looking for him?" exclaimed Aristide.

"Arrangements have been made," replied the detective coldly.

Aristide suddenly bethought him of the furtive masquer of the night before.

"I can put you on his track," said he, and related what he knew.

The Mayor looked dubious. "It wasn't he," he remarked.

"José Puégas, Monsieur, would not commit a burglary in a pig's head," said the policeman, with the cutting contempt of the expert.

"It was a vow, I suppose," said Aristide, stung to irony. "I've always heard he was a religious man."

The detective did not condescend to reply.

"Monsieur le Maire," said he, "I should like to examine the premises, and beg that you will have the kindness to accompany me."

"With the permission of Monsieur le Maire," said Aristide. "I too will come."

"Certainly," said the Mayor. "The more intelligences concentrated on the affair the better."

"I am not of that opinion," said the detective.

"It is the opinion of Monsieur le Maire," said Aristide rebukingly, "and that is enough."

When they reached the house—distances are short in Perpignan—they found policemen busily engaged with tape measures around the premises. Old Madame Coquereau in a clean white linen dressing jacket, bare-headed, defying the keen air, stood grim and eager in the midst of them.

"Good morning, Monsieur Pujol, what do you think of this?"

"A veritable catastrophe," said Aristide.

She shrugged her iron shoulders. "I tell him it serves him right," she said, cuttingly. "A sensible person keeps his money under his mattress and not in a tin machine by a window which anyone can get at. I wonder we've not been murdered in our beds before."

"Ah, Maman!" expostulated the Mayor of Perpignan.

But she turned her back on him and worried the policemen. They, having probed, and measured, and consulted with the detective, came to an exact conclusion. The thief had climbed over the back wall—there were his footsteps. He had entered by the kitchen door—there were the marks of infraction. He had broken open the safe—there was the helpless condition of the lock. No one in Perpignan, but José Puégas, with his bad, socialistic, Barcelona blood, could have done it. These brilliant results were arrived at after much clamour and argument and imposing *procès verbal.* Aris-

tide felt strangely depressed. He had narrated his story of the pig-headed masquer to unresponsive ears. Here was a melodramatic scene in which he not only was not playing a leading part, but did not even carry a banner. To be less than a super in life's pageant was abhorrent to the nature of Aristide Pujol.

Moodily he wandered away from the little crowd. He hated the police and their airs of gods for whom exists no mystery. He did not believe in the kitchen-door theory. Why should not the thief have simply entered by the window of the study, which like the kitchen, was on the ground floor? He went round the house and examined the window by himself. No; there were no traces of burglary. The fastenings of the outside shutters and the high window were intact. The police were right.

Suddenly his quick eye lit on something in the gravel path and his heart gave a great leap. It was a little round pink disc of confetti.

Aristide picked it up and began to dance and shake his fist at the invisible police.

"Aha!" he cried, "now we shall see who is right and who is wrong!"

He began to search and soon found another bit of confetti. A little further along he discovered a third and a fourth. By using his walking stick he discovered that they formed a trail to a point in

the wall. He examined the wall. There, if his eyes did not deceive him, were evidences of mortar dislodged by nefarious toes. And there, *mirabile visu!* at the very bottom of the wall lay a little woollen pompon or tassel, just the kind of pompon that gives a finish to a pierrot's shoes. Evidently the scoundrel had scraped it off against the bricks while clambering over.

The pig-headed masquer stood confessed.

A less imaginative man than Aristide would have immediately acquainted the police with his discovery. But Aristide had been insulted. A dull, mechanical bureaucrat who tried to discover crime with a tape-measure had dared to talk contemptuously of his intelligence! On his wooden head should be poured the vials of his contempt.

"Tron de l'air!" cried Aristide—a Provençal oath which he only used on sublime occasions—"It is I who will discover the thief and make the whole lot of you the laughing-stock of Perpignan."

So did my versatile friend, joyously confident in his powers, start on his glorious career as a private detective.

"Madame Coquereau," said he, that evening, while she was dealing a hand at piquet, "what would you say if I solved this mystery and brought the scoundrel to justice?"

"To say that you would have more sense than

the police, would be a poor compliment," said the old lady.

Stéphanie raised cloistral eyes from her embroidery frame. She sat in a distant corner of the formal room discreetly lit by a shaded lamp.

"You have a clue, Monsieur?" she asked with adorable timidity.

Aristide tapped his forehead with his fore-finger. "All is there, Mademoiselle."

They exchanged a glance—the first they had exchanged—while Madame Coquereau was frowning at her cards; and Aristide interpreted the glance as the promise of supreme reward for great deeds accomplished.

The mayor returned early from the café, a dejected man. The loss of his hundred and twenty pounds weighed heavily on his mind. He kissed his mother sorrowfully on the cheek, his niece on the brow, held out a drooping hand to Aristide, and, subsiding into a stiff imitation Louis XVI chair, rested his elbows on its unconsoling arms and hid his face in his hands.

"My poor uncle! You suffer so much?" breathed Stéphanie, in divine compassion.

"Little Saint!" murmured Aristide devoutly, as he declared four aces and three queens.

The Mayor moved his head sympathetically. He was suffering from the sharpest pain in his pocket

he had felt for many a day. Madame Coquereau's attention wandered from the cards.

"*Dis donc*, Fernand," she said sharply. "Why are you not wearing your ring?"

The Mayor looked up.

"*Maman*," said he, "it is stolen."

"Your beautiful ring?" cried Aristide.

The Mayor's ring, which he usually wore, was a remarkable personal adornment. It consisted in a couple of snakes in old gold clenching an enormous topaz between their heads. Only a Mayor could have worn it with decency.

"You did not tell me, Fernand," rasped the old lady. "You did not mention it to me as being one of the stolen objects."

The Mayor rose wearily. "It was to avoid giving you pain, *maman*. I know what a value you set upon the ring of my good Aunt Philomène."

"And now it is lost," said Madame Coquereau, throwing down her cards. "A ring that belonged to a saint. Yes, Monsieur Pujol, a saint, though she was my sister. A ring that had been blessed by His Holiness the Pope——"

"But, *maman*," expostulated the Mayor, "that was an imagination of Aunt Philomène. Just because she went to Rome and had an audience like anyone else——"

"Silence, impious atheist that you are!" cried the old lady. "I tell you it was blessed by His Holi-

ness—and when I tell you a thing it is true. That is the son of to-day. He will call his mother a liar as soon as look at her. It was a ring beyond price. A ring such as there are few in the world. And instead of taking care of this precious heirloom, he goes and locks it away in a safe. Ah! you fill me with shame. Monsieur Pujol, I am sorry I can play no more, I must retire. Stéphanie, will you accompany me?"

And gathering up Stéphanie like a bunch of snowdrops, the yellow, galvanized iron old lady swept out of the room.

The Mayor looked at Aristide and moved his arms dejectedly.

"Such are women," said he.

"My own mother nearly broke her heart because I would not become a priest," said Aristide.

"I wish I were a Turk," said the Mayor.

"I, too," said Aristide.

He took pouch and papers and rolled a cigarette.

"If there is a man living who can say he has not felt like that at least once in his life he ought to be exhibited at a fair."

"How well you understand me, my good Pujol," said Monsieur Coquereau.

The next few days passed busily for Aristide. He devoted every spare hour to his new task. He scrutinized every inch of ground between the study

window and the wall; he drew radiating lines from the point of the wall whence the miscreant had started homeward and succeeded in finding more confetti. He cross-examined every purveyor of pierrot shoes and pig's heads in Perpignan. His researches soon came to the ears of the police, still tracing the mysterious José Puégas. A certain good-humoured brigadier whose Catalan French Aristide found difficult to understand, but with whom he had formed a derisory kind of friendship, urged him to desist from the hopeless task.

"*Jamais de la vie!*" he cried—"The honour of Aristide Pujol is at stake."

The thing became an obsession. Not only his honour but his future was at stake. If he discovered the thief, he would be the most talked of person in Perpignan. He would know how to improve his position. He would rise to dizzy heights. Perpignan-Ville de Plaisir would acclaim him as its saviour. The Government would decorate him. And finally, both the Mayor and Madame Coquereau would place the blushing and adorable Mademoiselle Stéphanie in his arms and her two hundred and fifty thousand francs dowry in his pocket. Never before had so dazzling a prize shimmered before him in the near distance.

On the last Saturday night of the Carnival, there was a special *corso* for the populace in the Avenue des Plantanes, the long splendid Avenue of plane

trees just outside the Porte Notre Dame, which is the special glory of Perpignan. The masquers danced to three or four bands. They threw confetti and *serpentins*. They rode hobby-horses and beat each other with bladders. They joined in bands of youths and maidens and whirled down the Avenue in Bacchic madness. It was a *corso blanc*, and everyone wore white—chiefly modifications of Pierrot costume—and everyone was masked. Chinese lanterns hung from the trees and in festoons around the bandstands and darted about in the hands of the revellers. Above, great standard electric lamps shed their white glare upon the eddying throng casting a myriad of grotesque shadows. Shouts and laughter and music filled the air.

Aristide in a hideous red mask and with a bag of confetti under his arm, plunged with enthusiasm into the revelry. To enjoy yourself you only had to throw your arm round a girl's waist and swing her off wildly to the beat of the music. If you wanted to let her go you did so; if not, you talked in the squeaky voice that is the recognized etiquette of the carnival. On the other hand any girl could catch you in her grip and sweep you along with her. Your mad career generally ended in a crowd and a free fight of confetti. There was one fair masquer, however, to whom Aristide became peculiarly attracted. Her movements were

free, her figure dainty and her repartee, below her mask, more than usually piquant.

"This hurly-burly," said he, drawing her into a quiet eddy of the stream, "is no place for the communion of two twin souls."

"Beau masque," said she, "I perceive that you are a man of much sensibility."

"Shall we find a spot where we can mingle the overflow of our exquisite natures?"

"As you like."

"Allons! Hop!" cried he, and seizing her round the waist danced through the masquers to the very far end of the Avenue.

"There is a sequestered spot round here," he said.

They turned. The sequestered spot, a seat beneath a plane tree, with a lonesome arc-lamp shining full upon it, was occupied.

"It's a pity!" said the fair unknown.

But Aristide said nothing. He stared. On the seat reposed an amorous couple. The lady wore a white domino and a black mask. The cavalier, whose arm was around the lady's waist, wore a pig's head, and a clown or Pierrot's dress.

Aristide's eyes fell upon the shoes. On one of them the pompon was missing.

The lady's left hand tenderly patted the cardboard snout of her lover. The fierce light of the arc lamp caught the hand and revealed, on the

fourth finger, a topaz ring, the topaz held in its place by two snakes' heads.

Aristide stared for two seconds; it seemed to him two centuries. Then he turned simply, caught his partner again, and with a *"Allons, Hop!"* raced back to the middle of the throng. There, in the crush, he unceremoniously lost her, and sped like a maniac to the entrance gates. His friend the brigadier happened to be on duty. He unmasked himself, dragged the police agent aside, and breathless, half-hysterical, acquainted him with the astounding discovery.

"I was right, *mon vieux!* There at the end of the Avenue you will find them. The pig-headed prowler I saw, with *my* pompom missing from his shoe, and his *bonne amie* wearing the stolen ring. Ah! you police people with your tape-measures and your José Puégas! It is I, Aristide Pujol, who have to come to Perpignan to teach you your business!"

"What do you want me to do?" asked the brigadier stolidly.

"Do?" cried Aristide. "Do you think I want you to kiss them and cover them with roses? What do you generally do with thieves in Perpignan?"

"Arrest them," said the brigadier.

"Eh bien!" said Aristide. Then he paused—possibly the drama of the situation striking him. "No, wait. Go and find them. Don't take your

eyes off them. I will run and fetch Monsieur le Maire and he will identify his property—*et puis nous aurons la scène à faire.*"

The stout brigadier grunted an assent and rolled monumentally down the Avenue. Aristide, his pulses throbbing, his heart exulting, ran to the Mayor's house. He was rather a panting triumph than a man. He had beaten the police of Perpignan. He had discovered the thief. He was the hero of the town. Soon would the wedding bells be playing. . . . He envied the marble of the future statue. He would like to be on the pedestal himself.

He dashed past the maid-servant who opened the door and burst into the prim salon. Madame Coquereau was alone, just preparing to retire for the night. Mademoiselle Stéphanie had already gone to bed.

"*Mon Dieu,* what is all this?" she cried.

"Madame," shouted he, "glorious news. I have found the thief!"

He told his tale. Where was Monsieur le Maire?

"He has not yet come back from the café."

"I'll go and find him," said Aristide.

"And waste time? Bah!" said the iron-faced old lady, catching up a black silk shawl. "I will come with you and identify the ring of my sainted sister Philomène. Who should know it better than I?"

"As you like, Madame," said Aristide.

Two minutes found them on their journey. Madame Coquereau, in spite of her sixty-five years trudged along with springing step.

"They don't make metal like me, nowadays," she said scornfully.

When they arrived at the gate of the Avenue, the police on guard saluted. The mother of Monsieur le Maire was a power in Perpignan.

"Monsieur," said Aristide, in lordly fashion, to a policeman, "will you have the goodness to make a passage through the crowd for Madame Coquereau, and then help the Brigadier Pésac to arrest the burglar who broke into the house of Monsieur le Maire?"

The man obeyed, went ahead clearing the path with the unceremoniousness of the law, and Aristide giving his arm to Madame Coquereau followed gloriously. As the impressive progress continued the revellers ceased their revels and followed in the wake of Aristide. At the end of the Avenue Brigadier Pésac was on guard. He approached.

"They are still there," he said.

"Good," said Aristide.

The two police-officers, Aristide and Madame Coquereau turned the corner. At the sight of the police the guilty couple started to their feet. Ma-

dame Coquereau pounced like a hawk on the masked lady's hand.

"I identify it," she cried. "Brigadier, give these people in charge for theft."

The white masked crowd surged around the group, in the midst of which stood Aristide transfigured. It was his supreme moment. He flourished in one hand his red mask and in the other a pompon which he had extracted from his pocket.

"This I found," said he, "beneath the wall of Monsieur le Maire's garden. Behold the shoe of the accused."

The crowd murmured their applause and admiration. Neither of the prisoners stirred. The pig's head grinned at the world with its inane, painted leer. A rumbling voice beneath it said:

"We will go quietly."

"Attention s'il vous plaît," said the policemen, and each holding a prisoner by the arm they made a way through the crowd. Madame Coquereau and Aristide followed close behind.

"What did I tell you?" cried Aristide to the brigadier.

"It's Puégas, all the same," said the brigadier, over his shoulder.

"I bet you it's not," said Aristide, and striding swiftly to the back of the male prisoner whipped off the pig's head, and revealed to the petrified

throng the familiar features of the Mayor of Perpignan.

Aristide regarded him for two or three seconds open-mouthed, and then fell back into the arms of the Brigadier Pésac screaming with convulsive laughter. The crowd caught the infection of merriment. Shrieks filled the air. The vast mass of masqueraders held their sides, swayed helplessly, rolled in heaps, men and women, tearing each other's garments as they fell.

Aristide, deposited on the ground by the Brigadier Pésac laughed and laughed. When he recovered some consciousness of surroundings, he found the Mayor bending over him and using language that would have made Tophet put its fingers in its ears. He rose. Madame Coquereau shook her thin fists in his face.

"Imbecile! Triple fool!" she cried.

Aristide turned tail and fled. There was nothing else to do.

And that was the end of his career at Perpignan. Vanished were the dreams of civic eminence; melted into thin air the statue on the Quai Sadi-Carnot; faded, too, the vision of the modest Stéphanie crowned with orange-blossom; gone forever the two hundred and fifty thousand francs. Never since Alnaschar kicked over his basket of crockery was there such a hideous welter of shattered hopes.

If the Mayor had been allowed to go disguised

to the Police Station, he could have disclosed his identity and that of the lady in private to awe-stricken functionaries. He might have forgiven Aristide. But Aristide had exposed him to the derision of the whole of Roussillon and the never ending wrath of Madame Coquereau. Ruefully Aristide asked himself the question: why had the Mayor not taken him into the confidence of his masquerading escapade? Why had he not told him of the pretty widow, whom, unknown to his mother, he was courting? Why had he permitted her to wear the ring which he had given her so as to spite his sainted Aunt Philomène? And why had he gone on wearing the pig's head after Aristide had told him of his suspicions? Ruefully Aristide found no answers save in the general chuckle-headedness of mankind.

"If it hadn't been such a good farce I should have wept like a cow," said Aristide, after relating this story. "But every time I wanted to cry, I laughed. *Nom de Dieu!* You should have seen his face! And the face of Madame Coquereau! She opened her mouth wide showing ten yellow teeth and squealed like a rabbit! Oh, it was a good farce! He was very cross with me," he added after a smiling pause, "and when I got back to Paris I tried to pacify him."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I sent him my photograph," said Aristide.

VI

THE ADVENTURE OF FLEURETTE

ONE day, when Aristide was discoursing on the inexhaustible subject of woman, I pulled him up.

"My good friend," said I, "you seem to have fallen in love with every woman you have ever met. But for how many of them have you really cared?"

"Mon Dieu! For all of them!" he cried, springing from his chair and making a wind-mill of himself.

"Come, come," said I; "all that amorousness is just Gallic exuberance. Have you ever been really in love in your life?"

"How should I know?" said he. But he lit a cigarette, turned away, and looked out of window.

There was a short silence. He shrugged his shoulders, apparently in response to his own thoughts. Then he turned again suddenly, threw his cigarette into the fire, and thrust his hands into his pockets. He sighed.

"Perhaps there was Fleurette," said he, not looking at me. *"Est-ce qu'on sait jamais?* That wasn't

her real name—it was Marie-Joséphine; but people called her Fleurette. She looked like a flower, you know."

I nodded in order to signify my elementary acquaintance with the French tongue.

"The most delicate little flower you can conceive," he continued. *"Tiens,* she was a slender lily —so white, and her hair the flash of gold on it—and she had eyes—*des yeux de pervenche,* as we say in French. What is *pervenche* in English—that little pale-blue flower?"

"Periwinkle," said I.

"Periwinkle eyes! My God, what a language! Ah, no! She had *des yeux de pervenche.* . . . She was *diaphane,* diaphanous . . . impalpable as cigarette-smoke . . . a little nose like nothing at all, with nostrils like infinitesimal sea-shells. Anyone could have made a mouthful of her. . . . Ah! *Cré nom d'un chien!* Life is droll. It has no common sense. It is the game of a mountebank. . . . I've never told you about Fleurette. It was this way."

And the story he narrated I will do my best to set down.

The good M. Bocardon, of the Hôtel de la Curatterie at Nîmes, whose grateful devotion to Aristide has already been recorded, had a brother in Paris who managed the Hôtel du

Soleil et de l'Ecosse (strange conjuncture), a flourishing third-rate hostelry in the neighbourhood of the Halles Centrales. Thither flocked sturdy Britons in knickerbockers, stockings, and cloth caps, Teutons with tin botanizing boxes (for lunch transportation), and American school-marms realizing at last the dream of their modest and laborious lives. Accommodation was cheap, manners were easy, and knowledge of the gay city less than rudimentary.

To M. Bocardon of Paris Aristide, one August morning, brought glowing letters of introduction from M. and Mme. Bocardon of Nîmes. M. Bocardon of Paris welcomed Aristide as a Provençal and a brother. He brought out from a cupboard in his private bureau an hospitable bottle of old Armagnac, and discoursed with Aristide on the seductions of the South. It was there that he longed to retire—to a dainty little hotel of his own with a smart clientèle. The clientèle of the Hôtel du Soleil et de l'Ecosse was not to his taste. He spoke slightingly of his guests.

"There are people who know how to travel," said he, "and people who don't. These lost muttons here don't, and they make hotel-keeping a nightmare instead of a joy. A hundred times a day have I to tell them the way to Nôtre Dame. *Pouah!*" said he, gulping down his disgust and the rest of his Armagnac, "it is back-breaking."

"Tu sais, mon vieux," cried Aristide—he had the most lightning way of establishing an intimacy —"I have an idea. These lost sheep need a shepherd."

"Eh bien?" said M. Bocardon.

"Eh bien," said Aristide. "Why should not I be the shepherd, the official shepherd attached to the Hôtel du Soleil et de l'Ecosse?"

"Explain yourself," said M. Bocardon.

Aristide, letting loose his swift imagination, explained copiously, and hypnotized M. Bocardon with his glittering eye, until he had assured to himself a means of livelihood. From that moment he became the familiar genius of the hotel. Scorning the title of "guide," lest he should be associated in the minds of the guests with the squalid scoundrels who infest the Boulevard, he constituted himself "Directeur de l'Agence Pujol." An obfuscated Bocardon formed the rest of the agency and pocketed a percentage of Aristide's earnings, and Aristide, addressed as "Director" by the Anglo-Saxons, "M. le Directeur" by the Latins, and "Herr Direktor" by the Teutons, walked about like a peacock in a barn-yard.

At that period, and until he had learned up Baedeker by heart, a process which nearly gave him brain-fever, and still, he declares, brings terror into his slumbers, he knew little more of the history, topography, and art-treasures of Paris than

HE MUST HAVE DEALT OUT PARALYZING INFORMATION

the flock he shepherded. He must have dealt out paralyzing information. The Britons and the Germans seemed not to heed; but now and then the American school-marms unmasked the charlatan. On such occasions his unfaltering impudence reached heights truly sublime. The sharp-witted ladies looked in his eyes, forgot their wrongs, and, if he had told them that the Eiffel Tower had been erected by the Pilgrim Fathers, would have accepted the statement meekly

"My friend," said Aristide, with Provençal flourish and braggadocio, "I never met a woman that would not sooner be misled by me than be taught by the whole Faculty of the Sorbonne."

He had been practising this honourable profession for about a month, lodging with the good Mme. Bidoux at 213 bis, Rue Saint-Honoré, when, one morning, in the vestibule of the hotel, he ran into his old friend Batterby, whom he had known during the days of his professorship of French at the Academy for Young Ladies in Manchester. The pair had been fellow-lodgers in the same house in the Rusholme Road; but, whereas Aristide lived in one sunless bed-sitting-room looking on a forest of chimney-pots, Batterby, man of luxury and ease, had a suite of apartments on the first floor and kept an inexhaustible supply of whisky, cigars, and such-like etceteras of the opulent, and the very ugliest prize bull-pup you can imagine. Batterby, in gaudy

raiment, went to an office in Manchester; in gaudier raiment he often attended race meetings. He had rings and scarf-pins and rattled gold in his trousers pockets. He might have been an insufferable young man for a poverty-stricken teacher of French to have as a fellow-lodger; but he was not. Like all those born to high estate, he made no vulgar parade of his wealth, and to Aristide he showed the most affable hospitality. A friendship had arisen between them, which the years had idealized rather than impaired. So when they met that morning in the vestibule of the Hôtel du Soleil et de l'Ecosse their greetings were fervent and prolonged.

In person Batterby tended towards burliness. He had a red, jolly face, divided unequally by a great black moustache, and his manner was hearty. He slapped Aristide on the back many times and shook him by the shoulders.

"We must have a drink on this straight away, old man," said he.

"You're so strange, you English," said Aristide. "The moment you have an emotion you must celebrate it by a drink. 'My dear fellow, I've just come into a fortune; let us have a drink.' Or, 'My friend, my poor old father has just been run over by an omnibus; let us have a drink.' My good Reginald, look at the clock. It is only nine in the morning."

"Rot!" said Reginald. "Drink is good at any time."

They went into the dark and deserted smoking-room, where Batterby ordered Scotch and soda and Aristide, an abstemious man, a plain vermouth.

"What's that muck?" asked Batterby, when the waiter brought the drinks. Aristide explained. "Whisky's good enough for me," laughed the other. Aristide laughed too, out of politeness and out of joy at meeting his old friend.

"With you playing at guide here," said Batterby, when he had learned Aristide's position in the hotel, "it seems I have come to the right shop. There are no flies on me, you know, but when a man comes to Paris for the first time he likes to be put up to the ropes."

"Your first visit to Paris?" cried Aristide. *"Mon vieux,* what wonders are going to ravish your eyes! What a time you are going to have!"

Batterby bit off the end of a great black cigar.

"If the missus will let me," said he.

"Missus? Your wife? You are married, my dear Reginald?" Aristide leaped, in his unexpected fashion, from his chair and almost embraced him. "Ah, but you are happy, you are lucky. It was always like that. You open your mouth and the larks fall ready roasted into it! My congratulations. And she is here, in this hotel, your wife? Tell me about her."

Batterby lit his cigar. "She's nothing to write home about," he said, modestly. "She's French."

"French? No—you don't say so!" exclaimed Aristide, in ecstasy.

"Well, she was brought up in France from her childhood, but her parents were Finns. Funny place for people to come from—Finland—isn't it? You could never expect it—might just as well think of 'em coming from Lapland. She's an orphan. I met her in London."

"But that's romantic! And she is young, pretty?"

"Oh, yes; in a way," said the proprietary Briton.

"And her name?"

"Oh, she has a fool name—Fleurette. I wanted to call her Flossie, but she didn't like it."

"I should think not," said Aristide. "Fleurette is an adorable name."

"I suppose it's right enough," said Batterby. "But if I want to call her good old Flossie, why should she object? You married, old man? No? Well, wait till you are. You think women are angels all wrapped up in feathers and wings beneath their toggery, don't you? Well, they're just blooming porcupines, all bristling with objections."

"Mais, allons, donc!" cried Aristide. "You love her, your beautiful Finnish orphan brought up in France and romantically met in London, with the adorable name?"

"Oh, that's all right," said the easy Batterby, lifting his half-emptied glass. "Here's luck!"

"Ah—no!" said Aristide, leaning forward and clinking his wineglass against the other's tumbler. "Here is to madame."

When they returned to the vestibule they found Mrs. Batterby patiently awaiting her lord. She rose from her seat at the approach of the two men, a fragile flower of a girl, about three-and-twenty, pale as a lily, with exquisite though rather large features, and with eyes of the blue of the *pervenche* (in deference to Aristide I use the French name), which seemed to smile trustfully through perpetual tears. She was dressed in pale, shadowy blue—graceful, impalpable, like the smoke, said Aristide, curling upwards from a cigarette.

"Reggie has spoken of you many times, monsieur," said Fleurette, after the introduction had been effected.

Aristide was touched. "Fancy him remembering me! *Ce bon vieux Reginald.* Madame," said he, "your husband is the best fellow in the world."

"Feed him with sugar and he won't bite," said Batterby; whereat they all laughed, as if it had been a very good joke.

"Well, what about this Paris of yours?" he asked, after a while. "The missus knows as little of it as I do."

"Really?" asked Aristide.

"I lived all my life in Brest before I went to England," she said, modestly.

"She wants to see all the sights, the Louvre, the Morgue, the Cathedral of What's-its-name that you've got here. I've got to go round, too. Pleases her and don't hurt me. You must tote us about. We'll have a cab, old girl, as you can't do much walking, and good old Pujol will come with us."

"But that is ideal!" cried Aristide, flying to the door to order the cab; but before he could reach it he was stopped by three or four waiting tourists, who pointed, some to the clock, some to the wagonette standing outside, and asked the director when the personally-conducted party was to start. Aristide, who had totally forgotten the responsibilities attached to the directorship of the Agence Pujol and, but for this reminder, would have blissfully left his sheep to err and stray over Paris by themselves, returned crestfallen to his friends and explained the situation.

"But we'll join the party," said the cheery Batterby. "The more the merrier—good old beanfeast! Will there be room?"

"Plenty," replied Aristide, brightening. "But would it meet the wishes of madame?" Her pale face flushed ever so slightly and the soft eyes fluttered at him a half-astonished, half-grateful glance.

"With my husband and you, monsieur, I should love it," she said.

So Mr. and Mrs. Batterby joined the personally-conducted party, as they did the next morning, and the next, and several mornings after, and received esoteric information concerning the monuments of Paris that is hidden even from the erudite. The evenings, however, Aristide, being off duty, devoted to their especial entertainment. He took them to riotous and perspiring restaurants where they dined gorgeously for three francs fifty, wine included; to open-air *cafés-concerts* in the Champs Elysées, which Fleurette found infinitely diverting, but which bored Batterby, who knew not French, to stertorous slumber; to crowded brasseries on the Boulevard, where Batterby awakened, under a steady flow of whisky, to appreciative contemplation of Paris life. As in the old days of the Rusholme Road, Batterby flung his money about with unostentatious generosity. He was out for a beano, he declared, and hang the expense! Aristide, whose purse, scantily filled (truth to say) by the profits of the Agence Pujol, could contribute but modestly to this reckless expenditure, found himself forced to accept his friend's lavish hospitality. Once or twice, delicately, he suggested withdrawal from the evening's dissipation.

"But, my good M. Pujol," said Fleurette, with childish tragicality in her *pervenche* eyes, "without you we shall be lost. We shall not enjoy ourselves at all, at all."

So Aristide, out of love for his friend, and out of he knew not what for his friend's wife, continued to show them the sights of Paris. They went to the cabarets of Montmartre—the *Ciel,* where one is served by angels; the *Enfer,* where one is served by red devils in a Tartarean lighting; the *Néant,* where one has coffins for tables—than all of which vulgarity has imagined no more joy-killing dreariness, but which caused Fleurette to grip Aristide's hand tight in scared wonderment and Batterby to chuckle exceedingly. They went to the Bal Bullier and to various other balls undreamed of by the tourist, where Fleurette danced with Aristide, as light as an autumn leaf tossed by the wind, and Batterby absorbed a startling assortment of alcohols. In a word, Aristide procured for his friends prodigious diversion.

"How do you like this, old girl?" Batterby asked one night, at the Moulin de la Galette, a dizzying, not very decorous, and to the unsophisticated visitor a dangerous place of entertainment. "Better than Great Coram Street, isn't it?"

She smiled and laid her hand on his. She was a woman of few words but of many caressing actions.

"I ought to let you into a secret," said he. "This is our honeymoon."

"Who would have thought it?"

"A fortnight ago she was being killed in a

FLEURETTE DANCED WITH ARISTIDE, AS LIGHT AS AN AUTUMN LEAF TOSSED BY THE WIND

Bloomsbury boarding-house. There were two of 'em —she and a girl called Carrie. I used to call 'em Fetch and Carrie. This one was Fetch. Well, she fetched me, didn't you, old girl? And now you're Mrs. Reginald Batterby, living at your ease, eh?"

"Madame would grace any sphere," said Aristide.

"I wish I had more education," said Fleurette, humbly. "M. Pujol and yourself are so clever that you must laugh at me."

"We do sometimes, but you mustn't mind us. Remember—at the what-you-call-it—the little shanty at Versailles——?"

"The Grand Trianon," replied Aristide.

"That's it. When you were showing us the rooms. 'What is the Empress Josephine doing now?' " He mimicked her accent. "Ha! ha! And the poor soul gone to glory a couple of hundred years ago."

The little mouth puckered at the corners and moisture gathered in the blue eyes.

"Mais, mon Dieu, it was natural, the mistake," cried Aristide, gallantly. "The Empress Eugénie, the wife of another Napoleon, is still living."

"Bien sûr," said Fleurette. "How was I to know?"

"Never mind, old girl," said Batterby. "You're living all right, and out of that beastly boarding-

house, and that's the chief thing. Another month of it would have killed her. She had a cough that shook her to bits. She's looking better already, isn't she, Pujol?"

After this Aristide learned much of her simple history, which she, at first, had been too shy to reveal. The child of Finnish sea-folk who had drifted to Brest and died there, she had been adopted by an old Breton sea-dog and his wife. On their death she had entered, as maid, the service of an English lady residing in the town, who afterwards had taken her to England. After a while reverses of fortune had compelled the lady to dismiss her, and she had taken the situation in the boarding-house, where she had ruined her health and met the opulent and conquering Batterby. She had not much chance, poor child, of acquiring a profound knowledge of the history of the First Empire; but her manners were refined and her ways gentle and her voice was soft; and Aristide, citizen of the world, for whom caste distinctions existed not, thought her the most exquisite flower grown in earth's garden. He told her so, much to her blushing satisfaction.

One night, about three weeks after the Batterbys' arrival in Paris, Batterby sent his wife to bed and invited Aristide to accompany him for half an hour to a neighbouring café. He looked grave and troubled.

"I've been upset by a telegram," said he, when drinks had been ordered. "I'm called away to New York on business. I must catch the boat from Cherbourg to-morrow evening. Now, I can't take Fleurette with me. Women and business don't mix. She has jolly well got to stay here. I sha'n't be away more than a month. I'll leave her plenty of money to go on with. But what's worrying me is—how is she going to stick it? So look here, old man, you're my pal, aren't you?"

He stretched out his hand. Aristide grasped it impulsively.

"Why, of course, *mon vieux!*"

"If I felt that I could leave her in your charge, all on the square, as a real straight pal—I should go away happy."

"She shall be my sister," cried Aristide, "and I shall give her all the devotion of a brother. . . . I swear it—*tiens*—what can I swear it on?" He flung out his arms and looked round the café as if in search of an object. "I swear it on the head of my mother. Have no fear. I, Aristide Pujol, have never betrayed the sacred obligations of friendship. I accept her as a consecrated trust."

"You only need to have said 'Right-o,' and I would have believed you," said Batterby. "I haven't told her yet. There'll be blubbering all night. Let us have another drink."

When Aristide arrived at the Hôtel du Soleil

et de l'Ecosse at nine o'clock the next morning he found that Batterby had left Paris by an early train. Fleurette he did not meet until he brought back the sight-seers to the fold in the evening. She had wept much during the day; but she smiled bravely on Aristide. A woman could not stand in the way of her husband's business.

"By the way, what is Reginald's business?" Aristide asked.

She did not know. Reginald never spoke to her of such things; perhaps she was too ignorant to understand.

"But he will make a lot of money by going to America," she said. Then she was silent for a few moments. *"Mon Dieu!"* she sighed, at last. "How long the day has been!"

It was the beginning of many long days for Fleurette. Reginald did not write from Cherbourg or cable from New York, as he had promised, and the return American mail brought no letter. The days passed drearily. Sometimes, for the sake of human society, she accompanied the tourist parties of the Agence Pujol; but the thrill had passed from the Morgue and the glory had departed from Versailles. Sometimes she wandered out by herself into the streets and public gardens; but, pretty, unprotected, and fragile, she attracted the attention of evil or careless men, which struck cold terror into her heart. Most

often she sat alone and listless in the hotel, reading the feuilleton of the *Petit Journal,* and waiting for the post to bring her news.

"*Mon Dieu,* M. Pujol, what can have happened?"

"Nothing at all, *chère petite madame*"—question and answer came many times a day. "Only some foolish mischance which will soon be explained. The good Reginald has written and his letter has been lost in the post. He has been obliged to go on business to San Francisco or Buenos Ayres—*et, que voulez-vous?* one cannot have letters from those places in twenty-four hours."

"If only he had taken me with him!"

"But, dear Mme. Fleurette, he could not expose you to the hardships of travel. You, who are as fragile as a cobweb, how could you go to Patagonia or Senegal or Baltimore, those wild places where there are no comforts for women? You must be reasonable. I am sure you will get a letter soon—or else in a day or two he will come, with his good, honest face as if nothing had occurred—these English are like that—and call for whisky and soda. Be comforted, *chère petite madame.*"

Aristide did his best to comfort her, threw her in the companionship of decent women staying at the hotel, and devoted his evenings to her entertainment. But the days passed, and Reginald Batterby, with the good, honest face, neither wrote

nor ordered whisky and soda. Fleurette began to pine and fade.

One day she came to Aristide.

"M. Pujol, I have no more money left."

"Bigre!" said Pujol. "The good Bocardon will have to give you credit. I'll arrange it."

"But I already owe for three weeks," said Fleurette.

Aristide sought Bocardon. One week more was all the latter dared allow.

"But her husband will return and pay you. He is my old and intimate friend. I make myself hoarse in telling it to you, wooden-head that you are!"

But Bocardon, who had to account to higher powers, the proprietors of the hotel, was helpless. At the end of the week Fleurette was called upon to give up her room. She wept with despair; Aristide wept with fury; Bocardon wept out of sympathy. Already, said Bocardon, the proprietors would blame him for not using the legal right to detain madame's luggage.

"Mon Dieu! mon Dieu! what is to become of me?" wailed Fleurette.

"You forget, madame," said Aristide, with one of his fine flourishes, "that you are the sacred trust of Aristide Pujol."

"But I can't accept your money," objected Fleurette.

"Tron de l'air!" he cried. "Did your husband put you in my charge or did he not? Am I your legal guardian, or am I not? If I am your legal guardian, what right have you to question the arrangements made by your husband? Answer me that."

Fleurette, too gentle and too miserable for intricate argument, sighed.

"But it is your money, all the same."

Aristide turned to Bocardon. "Try," said he, "to convince a woman! Do you want proofs? Wait there a minute while I get them from the safe of the Agence Pujol."

He disappeared into the bureau, where, secure from observation, he tore an oblong strip from a sheet of stiff paper, and, using an indelible pencil, wrote out something fantastic halfway between a cheque and a bill of exchange, forged as well as he could from memory the signature of Reginald Batterby—the imitation of handwriting was one of Aristide's many odd accomplishments—and made the document look legal by means of a receipt stamp, which he took from Bocardon's drawer. He returned to the vestibule with the strip folded and somewhat crumpled in his hand. *"Voilà,"* said he, handing it boldly to Fleurette. "Here is your husband's guarantee to me, your guardian, for four thousand francs."

Fleurette examined the forgery. The stamp im-

pressed her. For the simple souls of France there is magic in *papier timbré.*

"It was my husband who wrote this?" she asked, curiously.

"Mais, oui," said Aristide, with an offended air of challenge.

Fleurette's eyes filled again with tears.

"I only inquired," she said, "because this is the first time I have seen his handwriting."

"Ma pauvre petite," said Aristide.

"I will do whatever you tell me, M. Pujol," said Fleurette, humbly.

"Good! That is talking like *une bonne petite dame raisonnable.* Now, I know a woman made up of holy bread whom St. Paul and St. Peter are fighting to have next them when she goes to Paradise. Her name is Mme. Bidoux, and she sells cabbages and asparagus and charcoal at No. 213bis, Rue Saint-Honoré. She will arrange our little affair. Bocardon, will you have madame's trunks sent to that address?"

He gave his arm to Fleurette, and walked out of the hotel, with serene confidence in the powers of the sainted Mme. Bidoux. Fleurette accompanied him unquestioningly. Of course she might have said: "If you hold negotiable security from my husband to the amount of four thousand francs, why should I exchange the comforts of the hotel for the doubtful accommodation of the sainted

Mme. Bidoux who sells cabbages?" But I repeat that Fleurette was a simple soul who took for granted the wisdom of so flamboyant and virile a creature as Aristide Pujol.

Away up at the top of No. 213bis, Rue Saint-Honoré, was a little furnished room to let, and there Aristide installed his sacred charge. Mme. Bidoux, who, as she herself maintained, would have cut herself into four pieces for Aristide—did he not save her dog's life? Did he not marry her daughter to the brigadier of gendarmes (*sale voyou!*), who would otherwise have left her lamenting? Was he not the most wonderful of God's creatures?—Mme. Bidoux, although not quite appreciating Aristide's quixotic delicacy, took the forlorn and fragile wisp of misery to her capacious bosom. She made her free of the cabbages and charcoal. She provided her, at a risible charge, with succulent meals. She told her tales of her father and mother, of her neighbours, of the domestic differences between the concierge and his wife (soothing idyll for an Ariadne!), of the dirty thief of a brigadier of gendarmes, of her bodily ailments—her body was so large that they were many; of the picturesque death, through apoplexy, of the late M. Bidoux; the brave woman, in short, gave her of her heart's best. As far as human hearts could provide a bed for Fleurette, that bed was of roses. As a matter of brutal fact, it was

narrow and nubbly, and the little uncarpeted room was ten feet by seven; but to provide it Aristide went to his own bed hungry. And if the bed of a man's hunger is not to be accounted as one of roses, there ought to be a vote for the reduction of the Recording Angel's salary.

It must not be imagined that Fleurette thought the bed hard. Her bed of life from childhood had been nubbly. She never dreamed of complaining of her little room under the stars, and she sat among the cabbages like a tired lily, quite contented with her material lot. But she drooped and drooped, and the cough returned and shook her; and Aristide, realizing the sacredness of his charge, became a prey to anxious terrors.

"Mère Bidoux," said he, "she must have lots of good, nourishing, tender, underdone beef, good fillets, and *entrecôtes saignantes.*"

Mme. Bidoux sighed. She had a heart, but she also had a pocket which, like Aristide's, was not over-filled. "That costs dear, my poor friend," she said.

"What does it matter what it costs? It is I who provide," said Aristide, grandly.

And Aristide gave up tobacco and coffee and the mild refreshment at cafès essential to the existence of every Frenchman, and degraded his soul by taking half-franc tips from tourists—a source of income which, as Director, M. le Directeur,

Herr Direktor of the Agence Pujol, he had hitherto scorned haughtily—in order to provide Fleurette with underdone beefsteaks.

All his leisure he devoted to her. She represented something that hitherto had not come into his life—something delicate, tender, ethereal, something of woman that was exquisitely adorable, apart from the flesh. Once, as he was sitting in the little shop, she touched his temple lightly with her fingers.

"Ah, you are good to me, Aristide."

He felt a thrill such as no woman's touch had ever caused to pass through him—far, far sweeter, cleaner, purer. If the *bon Dieu* could have given her to him then and there to be his wife, what bond could have been holier? But he had bound himself by a sacred obligation. His friend on his return should find him loyal.

"Who could help being good to you, little Fleurette?" said he. "Even an Apache would not tread on a lily of the valley!"

"But you put me in water and tend me so carefully."

"So that you can be fresh whenever the dear Reginald comes back."

She sighed. "Tell me what I can do for you, my good Aristide."

"Keep well and happy and be a valiant little woman," said he.

Fleurette tried hard to be valiant; but the effort exhausted her strength. As the days went on, even Aristide's inexhaustible conversation failed to distract her from brooding. She lost the trick of laughter. In the evenings, when he was most with her, she would sit, either in the shop or in the little room at the back, her blue childish eyes fixed on him wistfully. At first he tried to lure her into the gay street; but walking tired her. He encouraged her to sit outside on the pavement of the Rue Saint-Honoré and join with Mme. Bidoux in the gossip of neighbours; but she listened to them with uncomprehending ears. In despair Aristide, to coax a smile from her lips, practised his many queer accomplishments. He conjured with cards; he juggled with oranges; he had a mountebank's trick of putting one leg round his neck; he imitated the voices of cats and pigs and ducks, till Mme. Bidoux held her sides with mirth. He spent time and thought in elaborating what he called *bonnes farces,* such as dressing himself up in Mme. Bidoux's raiment and personifying a crabbed customer.

Fleurette smiled but listlessly at all these comicalities.

One day she was taken ill. A doctor, summoned, said many learned words which Aristide and Mme. Bidoux tried hard to understand.

"But, after all, what is the matter with her?"

ARISTIDE PRACTISED HIS MANY QUEER ACCOMPLISHMENTS

"She has no strength to struggle. She wants happiness."

"Can you tell me the druggist's where that can be procured?" asked Aristide.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. "I tell you the truth. It is one of those pulmonary cases. Happy, she will live; unhappy, she will die."

"My poor Mme. Bidoux, what is to be done?" asked Aristide, after the doctor had gone off with his modest fee. "How are we to make her happy?"

"If only she could have news of her husband!" replied Mme. Bidoux.

Aristide's anxieties grew heavier. It was November, when knickerbockered and culture-seeking tourists no longer fill the cheap hotels of Paris. The profits of the Agence Pujol dwindled. Aristide lived on bread and cheese, and foresaw the time when cheese would be a sinful luxury. Meanwhile Fleurette had her nourishing food, and grew more like the ghost of a lily every day. But her eyes followed Aristide, wherever he went in her presence, as if he were the god of her salvation.

One day Aristide, with an unexpected franc or two in his pocket, stopped in front of a *bureau de tabac*. A brown packet of caporal and a book of cigarette-papers—a cigarette rolled—how good it would be! He hesitated, and his glance fell on a collection of foreign stamps exposed in the win-

dow. Among them were twelve Honduras stamps all postmarked. He stared at them, fascinated.

"Mon brave Aristide!" he cried. "If the *bon Dieu* does not send you these vibrating inspirations, it is because you yourself have already conceived them!"

He entered the shop and emerged, not with caporal and cigarette-papers, but with the twelve Honduras stamps.

That night he sat up in his little bedroom at No. 213 bis, Rue Saint-Honoré, until his candle failed, inditing a letter in English to Fleurette. At the head of his paper he wrote "Hotel Rosario, Honduras." And at the end of the letter he signed the name of Reginald Batterby. Where Honduras was, he had but a vague idea. For Fleurette, at any rate, it would be somewhere at the other end of the world, and she would not question any want of accuracy in local detail. Just before the light went out he read the letter through with great pride. Batterby alluded to the many letters he had posted from remote parts of the globe, gave glowing forecasts of the fortune that Honduras had in store for him, reminded her that he had placed sufficient funds for her maintenance in the hands of Aristide Pujol, and assured her that the time was not far off when she would be summoned to join her devoted husband.

"Mme. Bidoux was right," said he, before going

to sleep. "This is the only way to make her happy."

The next day Fleurette received the letter. The envelope bore the postmarked Honduras stamp. It had been rubbed on the dusty pavement to take off the newness. It was in her husband's handwriting. There was no mistake about it—it was a letter from Honduras.

"Are you happier now, little doubting female St. Thomas that you are?" cried Aristide when she had told him the news.

She smiled at him out of grateful eyes, and touched his hand.

"Much happier, *mon bon ami,*" she said, gently.

Later in the day she handed him a letter addressed to Batterby. It had no stamp.

"Will you post this for me, Aristide?"

Aristide put the letter in his pocket and turned sharply away, lest she should see a sudden rush of tears. He had not counted on this innocent trustfulness. He went to his room. The poor little letter! He had not the heart to destroy it. No; he would keep it till Batterby came; it was not his to destroy. So he threw it into a drawer.

Having once begun the deception, however, he thought it necessary to continue. Every week, therefore, he invented a letter from Batterby. To interest her he drew upon his Provençal imagination. He described combats with crocodiles, lion-hunts, feasts with terrific savages from the in-

terior, who brought their lady wives chastely clad in petticoats made out of human teeth; he drew pictures of the town, a kind of palm-shaded Paris by the sea, where one ate ortolans and oysters as big as soup-plates, and where Chinamen with pig-tails rode about the streets on camels. It was not a correct description of Honduras, but, all the same, an exotic atmosphere stimulating and captivating rose from the pages. With this it was necessary to combine expressions of affection. At first it was difficult. Essential delicacy restrained him. He had also to keep in mind Batterby's vernacular. To address Fleurette, impalpable creation of fairyland, as "old girl" was particularly distasteful. By degrees, however, the artist prevailed. And then at last the man himself took to forgetting the imaginary writer and poured out words of love, warm, true, and passionate.

And every week Fleurette would smile and tell him the wondrous news, and would put into his hands an unstamped letter to post, which he, with a wrench of the heart, would add to the collection in the drawer.

Once she said, diffidently, with an unwonted blush and her pale blue eyes swimming: "I write English so badly. Won't you read the letter and correct my mistakes?"

But Aristide laughed and licked the flap of the envelope and closed it. "What has love to do with

spelling and grammar? The good Reginald would prefer your bad English to all the turned phrases of the Académie Française."

"It is as you like, Aristide," said Fleurette, with wistful eyes.

Yet, in spite of the weekly letters, Fleurette continued to droop. The winter came, and Fleurette was no longer able to stay among the cabbages of Mme. Bidoux. She lay on her bed in the little room, ten feet by seven, away, away at the top of the house in the Rue Saint Honoré. The doctor, informed of her comparative happiness, again shrugged his shoulders. There was nothing more to be done.

"She is dying, monsieur, for want of strength to live."

Then Aristide went about with a great heart-ache. Fleurette would die; she would never see the man she loved again. What would he say when he returned and learned the tragic story? He would not even know that Aristide, loving her, had been loyal to him. When the Director of the Agence Pujol personally conducted the clients of the Hôtel du Soleil et de l'Ecosse to the Grand Trianon and pointed out the bed of the Empress Josephine he nearly broke down.

"What is the Empress doing now?"

What was Fleurette doing now? Going to join the Empress in the world of shadows.

The tourists talked after the manner of their kind.

"She must have found the bed very hard, poor dear."

"Give me an iron bedstead and a good old spring mattress."

"Ah, but, my dear sir, you forget. The Empress's bed was slung on the back of tame panthers which Napoleon brought from Egypt."

It was hard to jest convincingly to the knickerbockered with death in one's soul.

"Most belovèd little Flower," ran the last letter that Fleurette received, "I have just had a cable from Aristide saying that you are very ill. I will come to you as soon as I can. *Ces petits yeux de pervenche*—I am learning your language here, you see—haunt me day and night . . ." etcetera, etcetera.

Aristide went up to her room with a great bunch of chrysanthemums. The letter peeped from under the pillow. Fleurette was very weak. Mme. Bidoux, who, during Fleurette's illness, had allowed her green grocery business to be personally conducted to the deuce by a youth of sixteen very much in love with the lady who sold sausages and other *charcuterie* next door, had spread out the fortune-telling cards on the bed and was prophesying mendaciously. Fleurette took the flowers and clasped them to her bosom.

"No letter for *ce cher Reginald?*"

She shook her head. "I can write no more," she whispered.

She closed her eyes. Presently she said, in a low voice:—

"Aristide—if you kiss me, I think I can go to sleep."

He bent down to kiss her forehead. A fragile arm twined itself about his neck and he kissed her on the lips.

"She is sleeping," said Mme. Bidoux, after a while.

Aristide tiptoed out of the room.

And so died Fleurette. Aristide borrowed money from the kind-hearted Bocardon for a beautiful funeral, and Mme. Bidoux and Bocardon and a few neighbours and himself saw her laid to rest. When they got back to the Rue Saint Honoré he told Mme. Bidoux about the letters. She wept and clasped him, weeping too, in her kind, fat old arms.

The next evening Aristide, coming back from his day's work at the Hôtel du Soleil et de l'Ecosse, was confronted in the shop by Mme. Bidoux, hands on broad hips.

"*Tiens, mon petit,*" she said, without preliminary greeting. "You are an angel. I knew it. But that a man's an angel is no reason for his being an imbecile. Read this."

She plucked a paper from her apron pocket and

thrust it into his hand. He read it, and blinked in amazement.

"Where did you get this, Mère Bidoux?"

"Where I got many more. In your drawer. The letters you were saving for this infamous scoundrel. I wanted to know what she had written to him."

"Mère Bidoux!" cried Aristide. "Those letters were sacred!"

"Bah!" said Mme. Bidoux, unabashed. "There is nothing sacred to a sapper or an old grandmother who loves an imbecile. I have read the letters, *et voilà, et voilà, et voilà!*" And she emptied her pockets of all the letters, minus the envelopes, that Fleurette had written.

And, after one swift glance at the first letter, Aristide had no compunction in reading. They were all addressed to himself.

They were very short, ill-written in a poor little uncultivated hand. But they all contained one message, that of her love for Aristide. Whatever illusions she may have had concerning Batterby had soon vanished. She knew, with the unerring instinct of woman, that he had betrayed and deserted her. Aristide's pious fraud had never deceived her for a second. Too gentle, too timid to let him know what was in her heart, she had written the secret patiently week after week, hoping every time that curiosity, or pity, or something—she knew not

HE READ IT, AND BLINKED IN AMAZEMENT

what—would induce him to open the idle letter, and wondering in her simple peasant's soul at the delicacy that caused him to refrain. Once she had boldly given him the envelope unclosed.

"She died for want of love, *parbleu,*" said Aristide, "and there was mine quivering in my heart and trembling on my lips all the time. . . . She had *des yeux de pervenche.* Ah! *nom d'un chien!* It is only with me that Providence plays such tricks."

He walked to the window and looked out into the grey street. Presently I heard him murmuring the words of the old French song:—

Elle est morte en février;
Pauvre Colinette!

VII

THE ADVENTURE OF THE MIRACLE

YOU have seen how Aristide, by attaching himself to the Hôtel du Soleil et de l'Ecosse as a kind of glorified courier, had founded the Agence Pujol. As he, personally, was the Agence, and the Agence was he, it happened that when he was not in attendance at the hotel, the Agence faded into space, and when he made his appearance in the vestibule and hung up his placard by the bureau, the Agence at once burst again into the splendour of existence. Apparently the fitful career of the Agence Pujol lasted some years. Whenever a chance of more remunerative employment turned up, Aristide took it and dissolved the Agence. Whenever outrageous fortune chivied him with slings and arrows penniless to Paris, there was always the Agence waiting to be resuscitated.

It was during one of these periodic flourishings of the Agence Pujol that Aristide met the Ducksmiths.

Business was slack, few guests were at the hotel, and of those few none desired to be personally conducted to the Louvre or Notre Dame or the

monument in the Place de la Bastile. They mostly wore the placid expression of folks engaged in business affairs instead of the worried look of pleasure-seekers.

"My good Bocardon," said Aristide, lounging by the bureau and addressing his friend the manager, "this is becoming desperate. In another minute I shall take you out by main force and show you the Pont Neuf."

At that moment the door of the stuffy salon opened, and a travelling Briton, whom Aristide had not seen before, advanced to the bureau and inquired his way to the Madeleine. Aristide turned on him like a flash.

"Sir," said he, extracting documents from his pockets with lightning rapidity, "nothing would give me greater pleasure than to conduct you thither. My card. My tariff. My advertisement." He pointed to the placard. "I am the managing director of the Agence Pujol, under the special patronage of this hotel. I undertake all travelling arrangements, from the Moulin Rouge to the Pyramids, and, as you see, my charges are moderate."

The Briton, holding the documents in a pudgy hand, looked at the swift-gestured director with portentous solemnity. Then, with equal solemnity, he looked at Bocardon.

"Monsieur Ducksmith," said the latter, "you can

repose every confidence in Monsieur Aristide Pujol."

"Umph!" said Mr. Ducksmith.

After another solemn inspection of Aristide, he stuck a pair of gold-rimmed glasses on his fleshy nose and perused the documents. He was a fat, heavy man of about fifty years of age, and his scanty hair was turning grey. His puffy cheeks hung jowl-like, giving him the appearance of some odd dog—a similarity greatly intensified by the eye-sockets, the lower lids of which were dragged down in the middle, showing the red like a blood-hound's; but here the similarity ended, for the man's eyes, dull and blue, had the unspeculative fixity of a rabbit's. His mouth, small and weak, dribbled away at the corners into the jowls which, in their turn, melted into two or three chins. He was decently dressed in grey tweeds, and wore a diamond ring on his little finger.

"Umph!" said he, at last; and went back to the salon.

As soon as the door closed behind him Aristide sprang into an attitude of indignation.

"Did you ever see such a bear! If I ever saw a bigger one I would eat him without salt or pepper. *Mais nom d'un chien,* such people ought to be made into sausages!"

"Flègme britannique!" laughed Bocardon.

Half an hour passed, and Mr. Ducksmith made

no reappearance from the salon. In the forlorn hope of a client Aristide went in after him. He found Mr. Ducksmith, glasses on nose, reading a newspaper, and a plump, black-haired lady, with an expressionless face, knitting a grey woollen sock. Why they should be spending their first morning—and a crisp, sunny morning, too—in Paris in the murky staleness of this awful little salon, Aristide could not imagine. As he entered, Mr. Ducksmith regarded him vacantly over the top of his gold-rimmed glasses.

"I have looked in," said Aristide, with his ingratiating smile, "to see whether you are ready to go to the Madeleine."

"Madeleine?" the lady inquired, softly, pausing in her knitting.

"Madame," Aristide came forward, and, hand on heart, made her the lowest of bows. "Madame, have I the honour of speaking to Madame Ducksmith? Enchanted, madame, to make your acquaintance," he continued, after a grunt from Mr. Ducksmith had assured him of the correctness of his conjecture. "I am Monsieur Aristide Pujol, director of the Agence Pujol, and my poor services are absolutely at your disposal."

He drew himself up, twisted his moustache, and met her eyes—they were rather sad and tired—with the roguish mockery of his own. She turned to her husband.

"Are you thinking of going to the Madeleine, Bartholomew?"

"I am, Henrietta," said he. "I have decided to do it. And I have also decided to put ourselves in the charge of this gentleman. Mrs. Ducksmith and I are accustomed to all the conveniences of travel—I may say that we are great travellers—and I leave it to you to make the necessary arrangements. I prefer to travel at so much per head per day."

He spoke in a wheezy, solemn monotone, from which all elements of life and joy seemed to have been eliminated. His wife's voice, though softer in timbre, was likewise devoid of colour.

"My husband finds that it saves us from responsibilities," she remarked.

"And over-charges, and the necessity of learning foreign languages, which at our time of life would be difficult. During all our travels we have not been to Paris before, owing to the impossibility of finding a personally-conducted tour of an adequate class."

"Then, my dear sir," cried Aristide, "it is Providence itself that has put you in the way of the Agence Pujol. I will now conduct you to the Madeleine without the least discomfort or danger."

"Put on your hat, Henrietta," said Mr. Ducksmith, "while this gentleman and I discuss terms."

Mrs. Ducksmith gathered up her knitting and

retired, Aristide dashing to the door to open it for her. This gallantry surprised her ever so little, for a faint flush came into her cheek and the shadow of a smile into her eyes.

"I wish you to understand, Mr. Pujol," said Mr. Ducksmith, "that being, I may say, a comparatively rich man, I can afford to pay for certain luxuries; but I made a resolution many years ago, which has stood me in good stead during my business life, that I would never be cheated. You will find me liberal but just."

He was as good as his word. Aristide, who had never in his life exploited another's wealth to his own advantage, suggested certain terms, on the basis of so much per head per day, which Mr. Ducksmith declared, with a sigh of relief, to be perfectly satisfactory.

"Perhaps," said he, after further conversation, "you will be good enough to schedule out a month's railway tour through France, and give me an inclusive estimate for the three of us. As I say, Mrs. Ducksmith and I are great travellers—we have been to Norway, to Egypt, to Morocco and the Canaries, to the Holy Land, to Rome, and lovely Lucerne—but we find that attention to the trivial detail of travel militates against our enjoyment."

"My dear sir," said Aristide, "trust in me, and your path and that of the charming Mrs. Ducksmith will be strewn with roses."

Whereupon Mrs. Ducksmith appeared, arrayed for walking out, and Aristide, having ordered a cab, drove with them to the Madeleine. They alighted in front of the majestic flight of steps. Mr. Ducksmith stared at the classical portico supported on its Corinthian columns with his rabbit-like, unspeculative gaze—he had those filmy blue eyes that never seem to wink—and after a moment or two turned away.

"Umph!" said he.

Mrs. Ducksmith, dutiful and silent, turned away also.

"This sacred edifice," Aristide began, in his best cicerone manner, "was built, after a classic model, by the great Napoleon, as a Temple of Fame. It was afterwards used as a church. You will observe—and, if you care to, you can count, as a conscientious American lady did last week—the fifty-six Corinthian columns. You will see they are Corinthian by the acanthus leaves on the capitals. For the vulgar, who have no architectural knowledge, I have *memoria technica* for the instant recognition of the three orders—Cabbages, Corinthian; horns, Ionic; anything else, Doric. We will now mount the steps and inspect the interior."

He was dashing off in his eager fashion, when Mr. Ducksmith laid a detaining hand on his arm.

"No," said he, solemnly. "I disapprove of Popish interiors. Take us to the next place."

HE MIGHT AS WELL HAVE POINTED OUT THE MARVELS OF KUBLA KHAN'S PLEASURE-DOME TO A COUPLE OF GUINEA-PIGS

He entered the waiting victoria. His wife meekly followed.

"I suppose the Louvre is the next place?" said Aristide.

"I leave it to you," said Mr. Ducksmith.

Aristide gave the order to the cabman and took the little seat in the cab facing his employers. On the way down the Rue Royale and the Rue de Rivoli he pointed out the various buildings of interest—Maxim's, the Cercle Royal, the Ministère de la Marine, the Hôtel Continental. Two expressionless faces, two pairs of unresponsive eyes, met his merry glance. He might as well have pointed out the marvels of Kubla Khan's pleasure-dome to a couple of guinea-pigs.

The cab stopped at the entrance to the galleries of the Louvre. They entered and walked up the great staircase on the turn of which the Winged Victory stands, with the wind of God in her vesture, proclaiming to each beholder the deathless, ever-soaring, ever-conquering spirit of man, and heralding the immortal glories of the souls, wind-swept likewise by the wind of God, that are enshrined in the treasure-houses beyond.

"There!" said Aristide.

"Umph! No head," said Mr. Ducksmith, passing it by with scarcely a glance.

"Would it cost very much to get a new one?"

asked Mrs. Ducksmith, timidly. She was three or four paces behind her spouse.

"It would cost the blood and tears and laughter of the human race," said Aristide.

("That was devilish good, wasn't it?" remarked Aristide, when telling me this story. He always took care not to hide his light under the least possibility of a bushel.)

The Ducksmiths looked at him in their lack-lustre way, and allowed themselves to be guided into the picture-galleries, vaguely hearing Aristide's comments, scarcely glancing at the pictures, and manifesting no sign of interest in anything whatever. From the Louvre they drove to Notre Dame, where the same thing happened. The venerable pile, standing imperishable amid the vicissitudes of centuries (the phrase was that of the director of the Agence Pujol), stirred in their bosoms no perceptible emotion. Mr. Ducksmith grunted and declined to enter; Mrs. Ducksmith said nothing.

As with pictures and cathedrals, so it was with their food at lunch. Beyond a solemn statement to the effect that in their quality of practised travellers they made a point of eating the food and drinking the wine of the country, Mr. Ducksmith did not allude to the meal. At any rate, thought Aristide, they don't clamour for underdone chops and tea. So far they were human. Nor did they

maintain an awful silence during the repast. On the contrary, Mr. Ducksmith loved to talk—in a dismal, pompous way—chiefly of British politics. His method of discourse was to place himself in the position of those in authority and to declare what he would do in any given circumstances. Now, unless the interlocutor adopts the same method and declares what *he* would do, conversation is apt to become one-sided. Aristide, having no notion of a policy should he find himself exercising the functions of the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, cheerfully tried to change the ground of debate.

"What would you do, Mr. Ducksmith, if you were King of England?"

"I should try to rule the realm like a Christian statesman," replied Mr. Ducksmith.

"I should have a devil of a time!" said Aristide.

"I beg your pardon?" said Mr. Ducksmith.

"I should have a—ah, I see—*pardon.* I should——" He looked from one paralyzing face to the other, and threw out his arms. *"Parbleu!"* said he, "I should decapitate your Mrs. Grundy, and make it compulsory for bishops to dance once a week in Trafalgar Square. *Tiens!* I would have it a capital offence for any English cook to prepare hashed mutton without a license, and I would banish all the bakers of the kingdom to Siberia—ah! your English bread, which you have to eat stale

so as to avoid a horrible death!—and I would open two hundred thousand *cafés—mon Dieu!* how thirsty I have been there!—and I would make every English work-girl do her hair properly, and I would ordain that everybody should laugh three times a day, under pain of imprisonment for life."

"I am afraid, Mr. Pujol," remarked Mr. Ducksmith, seriously, "you would not be acting as a constitutional monarch. There is such a thing as the British Constitution, which foreigners are bound to admire, even though they may not understand."

"To be a king must be a great responsibility," said Mrs. Ducksmith.

"Madame," said Aristide, "you have uttered a profound truth." And to himself he murmured, though he should not have done so, "*Nom de Dieu! Nom de Dieu de nom de Dieu!*"

After lunch they drove to Versailles, which they inspected in the same apathetic fashion; then they returned to the hotel, where they established themselves for the rest of the day in the airless salon, Mr. Ducksmith reading English newspapers and his wife knitting a grey woollen sock.

"*Mon vieux!*" said Aristide to Bocardon, "they are people of a nightmare. They are automata endowed with the faculty of digestion. *Ce sont des gens invraisemblables.*"

Paris providing them, apparently, with no entertainment, they started, after a couple of days,

Aristide duce et auspice Pujol, on their railway tour through France, to Aristide a pilgrimage of unimaginable depression. They began with Chartres, continued with the Châteaux of the Loire, and began to work their way south. Nothing that Aristide could do roused them from their apathy. They were exasperatingly docile, made few complaints, got up, entrained, detrained, fed, excursioned, slept, just as they were bidden. But they looked at nothing, enjoyed nothing (save perhaps English newspapers and knitting), and uttered nothing by way of criticism or appreciation when Aristide attempted to review the wonders through which they had passed. They did not care to know the history, authentic or Pujolic, of any place they visited; they were impressed by no scene of grandeur, no corner of exquisite beauty. To go on and on, in a dull, non-sentient way, so long as they were spared all forethought, all trouble, all afterthought, seemed to be their ideal of travel. Sometimes Aristide, after a fruitless effort to capture their interest, would hold his head, wondering whether he or the Ducksmith couple were insane. It was a dragon-fly personally conducting two moles through a rose-garden.

Once only, during the early part of their journey, did a gleam of joyousness pierce the dull glaze of Mr. Ducksmith's eyes. He had procured from the bookstall of a station a pile of English newspapers, and was reading them in the train,

while his wife knitted the interminable sock. Suddenly he folded a *Daily Telegraph,* and handed it over to Aristide so that he should see nothing but a half-page advertisement. The great capitals leaped to Aristide's eyes:—

"DUCKSMITH'S DELICATE JAMS."

"I am *the* Ducksmith," said he. "I started and built up the business. When I found that I could retire, I turned it into a limited liability company, and now I am free and rich and able to enjoy the advantages of foreign travel."

Mrs. Ducksmith started, sighed, and dropped a stitch.

"Did you also make pickles?" asked Aristide.

"I did manufacture pickles, but I made my name in jam. In the trade you will find it an honoured one."

"It is that in every nursery in Europe," Aristide declared, with polite hyperbole.

"I have done my best to deserve my reputation," said Mr. Ducksmith, as impervious to flattery as to impressions of beauty.

"*Pecaïre!*" said Aristide to himself, "how can I galvanize these corpses?"

As the soulless days went by this problem grew to be Aristide's main solicitude. He felt strangled, choked, borne down by an intolerable weight.

What could he do to stir their vitality? Should he fire off pistols behind them, just to see them jump? But would they jump? Would not Mr. Ducksmith merely turn his rabbit-eyes, set in their bloodhound sockets, vacantly on him, and assume that the detonations were part of the tour's programme? Could he not fill him up with conflicting alcohols, and see what inebriety would do for him? But Mr. Ducksmith declined insidious potations. He drank only at meal-times, and sparingly. Aristide prayed that some Thais might come along, cast her spell upon him, and induce him to wink. He himself was powerless. His raciest stories fell on dull ears; none of his jokes called forth a smile. At last, having taken them to nearly all the historic châteaux of Touraine, without eliciting one cry of admiration, he gave Mr. Ducksmith up in despair and devoted his attention to the lady.

Mrs. Ducksmith parted her smooth black hair in the middle and fastened it in a knob at the back of her head. Her clothes were good and new, but some desolate dressmaker had contrived to invest them with an air of hopeless dowdiness. At her bosom she wore a great brooch, containing intertwined locks of a grandfather and grandmother long since defunct. Her mind was as drearily equipped as her person. She had a vague idea that they were travelling in France; but if Aristide had told her that it was Japan she would have meekly

accepted the information. She had no opinions. Still she was a woman, and Aristide, firm in his conviction that when it comes to love-making all women are the same, proceeded forthwith to make love to her.

"Madame," said he, one morning—she was knitting in the vestibule of the Hôtel du Faisan at Tours, Mr. Ducksmith being engaged, as usual, in the salon with his newspapers—"how much more charming that beautiful grey dress would be if it had a spot of colour."

His audacious hand placed a deep crimson rose against her corsage, and he stood away at arm's length, his head on one side, judging the effect.

"Magnificent! If madame would only do me the honour to wear it."

Mrs. Ducksmith took the flower hesitatingly.

"I'm afraid my husband does not like colour," she said.

"He must be taught," cried Aristide. "You must teach him. I must teach him. Let us begin at once. Here is a pin."

He held the pin delicately between finger and thumb, and controlled her with his roguish eyes. She took the pin and fixed the rose to her dress.

"I don't know what Mr. Ducksmith will say."

"What he ought to say, madame, is 'Bountiful Providence, I thank Thee for giving me such a beautiful wife.'"

Mrs. Ducksmith blushed and, to conceal her face, bent it over her resumed knitting. She made woman's time-honoured response.

"I don't think you ought to say such things, Mr. Pujol."

"Ah, madame," said he, lowering his voice; "I have tried not to; but, *que voulez-vous,* it was stronger than I. When I see you going about like a little grey mouse"—the lady weighed at least twelve stone—"you, who ought to be ravishing the eyes of mankind, I feel indignation here"—he thumped his chest; "my Provençal heart is stirred. It is enough to make one weep."

"I don't quite understand you, Mr. Pujol," she said, dropping stitches recklessly.

"Ah, madame," he whispered—and the rascal's whisper on such occasions could be very seductive —"that I will never believe."

"I am too old to dress myself up in fine clothes," she murmured.

"That's an illusion," said he, with a wide-flung gesture, "that will vanish at the first experiment."

Mr. Ducksmith emerged from the salon, *Daily Telegraph* in hand. Mrs. Ducksmith shot a timid glance at him and the knitting needles clicked together nervously. But the vacant eyes of the heavy man seemed no more to note the rose on her bosom than they noted any point of beauty in landscape or building.

Aristide went away chuckling, highly diverted by the success of his first effort. He had touched some hidden springs of feeling. Whatever might happen, at any rate, for the remainder of the tour he would not have to spend his emotional force in vain attempts to knock sparks out of a jelly-fish. He noticed with delight that at dinner that evening Mrs. Ducksmith, still wearing the rose, had modified the rigid sweep of her hair from the mid-parting. It gave just a wavy hint of coquetry. He made her a little bow and whispered, "Charming!" Whereupon she coloured and dropped her eyes. And during the meal, while Mr. Ducksmith discoursed on bounty-fed sugar, his wife and Aristide exchanged, across the table, the glances of conspirators. After dinner he approached her.

"Madame, may I have the privilege of showing you the moon of Touraine?"

She laid down her knitting. "Bartholomew, will you come out?"

He looked at her over his glasses and shook his head.

"What is the good of looking at moonshine? The moon itself I have already seen."

So Aristide and Mrs. Ducksmith sat by themselves outside the hotel, and he expounded to her the beauty of moonlight and its intoxicating effect on folks in love.

"Wouldn't you like," said he, "to be lying on that white burnished cloud with your beloved kissing your feet?"

"What odd things you think of."

"But wouldn't you?" he insinuated.

Her bosom heaved and swelled on a sigh. She watched the strip of silver for a while and then murmured a wistful "Yes."

"I can tell you of many odd things," said Aristide. "I can tell you how flowers sing and what colour there is in the notes of birds. And how a cornfield laughs, and how the face of a woman who loves can outdazzle the sun. *Chère madame,*" he went on, after a pause, touching her little plump hand, "you have been hungering for beauty and thirsting for sympathy all your life. Isn't that so?"

She nodded.

"You have always been misunderstood."

A tear fell. Our rascal saw the glistening drop with peculiar satisfaction. Poor Mrs. Ducksmith! It was a child's game. *Enfin,* what woman could resist him? He had, however, one transitory qualm of conscience, for, with all his vagaries, Aristide was a kindly and honest man. Was it right to disturb those placid depths? Was it right to fill this woman with romantic aspirations that could never be gratified? He himself had not the slightest intention of playing Lothario and of

wrecking the peace of the Ducksmith household. The realization of the saint-like purity of his aims reassured him. When he wanted to make love to a woman, *pour tout de bon,* it would not be to Mrs. Ducksmith.

"Bah!" said he to himself. "I am doing a noble and disinterested act. I am restoring sight to the blind. I am giving life to one in a state of suspended animation. *Tron de l'Air!* I am playing the part of a soul-reviver! And, *parbleu!* it isn't Jean or Jacques that can do that. It takes an Aristide Pujol!"

So, having persuaded himself, in his Southern way, that he was executing an almost divine mission, he continued, with a zest now sharpened by an approving conscience, to revive Mrs. Ducksmith's soul.

The poor lady, who had suffered the blighting influence of Mr. Ducksmith for twenty years with never a ray of counteracting warmth from the outside, expanded like a flower to the sun under the soul-reviving process. Day by day she exhibited some fresh timid coquetry in dress and manner. Gradually she began to respond to Aristide's suggestions of beauty in natural scenery and exquisite building. On the ramparts of Angoulême, daintiest of towns in France, she gazed at the smiling valleys of the Charente and the Son stretching away below, and of her own accord touched his

arm lightly and said: "How beautiful!" She appealed to her husband.

"Umph!" said he.

Once more (it had become a habit) she exchanged glances with Aristide. He drew her a little farther along, under pretext of pointing out the dreamy sweep of the Charente.

"If he appreciates nothing at all, why on earth does he travel?"

Her eyelids fluttered upwards for a fraction of a second.

"It's his mania," she said. "He can never rest at home. He must always be going on—on."

"How can you endure it?" he asked.

She sighed. "It is better now that you can teach me how to look at things."

"Good!" thought Aristide. "When I leave them she can teach him to look at things and revive his soul. Truly I deserve a halo."

As Mr. Ducksmith appeared to be entirely unperceptive of his wife's spiritual expansion, Aristide grew bolder in his apostolate. He complimented Mrs. Ducksmith to his face. He presented her daily with flowers. He scarcely waited for the heavy man's back to be turned to make love to her. If she did not believe that she was the most beautiful, the most ravishing, the most delicate-souled woman in the world, it was through no fault of Aristide. Mr. Ducksmith went his pompous,

unseeing way. At every stopping-place stacks of English daily papers awaited him. Sometimes, while Aristide was showing them the sights of a town—to which, by the way, he insisted on being conducted—he would extract a newspaper from his pocket and read with dull and dogged stupidity. Once Aristide caught him reading the advertisements for cooks and housemaids. In these circumstances Mrs. Ducksmith spiritually expanded at an alarming rate; and, correspondingly, dwindled the progress of Mr. Ducksmith's sock.

They arrived at Perigueux, in Perigord, land of truffles, one morning, in time for lunch. Towards the end of the meal the *maître d'hôtel* helped them to great slabs of *pâté de foie gras,* made in the house—most of the hotel-keepers in Perigord make *pâté de foie gras,* both for home consumption and for exportation—and waited expectant of their appreciation. He was not disappointed. Mr. Ducksmith, after a hesitating glance at the first mouthful, swallowed it, greedily devoured his slab, and, after pointing to his empty plate, said, solemnly:—

"Plou."

Like Oliver, he asked for more.

"Tiens!" thought Aristide, astounded. "Is he, too, developing a soul?"

But, alas! there were no signs of it when they went their dreary round of the town in the usual ramshackle open cab. The cathedral of Saint-

Front, extolled by Aristide and restored by Abadie —a terrible fellow who has capped with tops of pepper-castors every pre-Gothic building in France— gave him no thrill; nor did the picturesque, tumble-down ancient buildings on the banks of the Dordogne, nor the delicate Renaissance façades in the cool, narrow Rue du Lys.

"We will now go back to the hotel," said Mr. Ducksmith.

"But have we seen it all?" asked his wife.

"By no means," said Aristide.

"We will go back to the hotel," repeated her husband, in his expressionless tones. "I have seen enough of Perigueux."

This was final. They drove back to the hotel. Mr. Ducksmith, without a word, went straight into the salon, leaving Aristide and his wife standing in the vestibule.

"And you, madame," said Aristide; "are you going to sacrifice the glory of God's sunshine to the manufacture of woollen socks?"

She smiled—she had caught the trick at last— and said, in happy submission: "What would you have me do?"

With one hand he clasped her arm; with the other, in a superb gesture, he indicated the sunlit world outside.

"Let us drain together," cried he, "the loveliness of Perigueux to its dregs!"

Greatly daring, she followed him. It was a rapturous escapade—the first adventure of her life. She turned her comely face to him and he saw smiles round her lips and laughter in her eyes. Aristide, worker of miracles, strutted by her side choke-full of vanity. They wandered through the picturesque streets of the old town with the gaiety of truant children, peeping through iron gateways into old courtyards venturing their heads into the murk of black stairways, talking (on the part of Aristide) with mothers who nursed chuckling babes on their doorsteps, crossing the thresholds, hitherto taboo, of churches, and meeting the mystery of coloured glass and shadows and the heavy smell of incense.

Her hand was on his arm when they entered the flagged courtyard of an ancient palace, a stately medley of the centuries, with wrought ironwork in the balconies, tourelles, oriels, exquisite Renaissance ornaments on architraves, and a great central Gothic doorway, with great window-openings above, through which was visible the stone staircase of honour leading to the upper floors. In a corner stood a mediæval well, the sides curiously carved. One side of the courtyard blazed in sunshine, the other lay cool and grey in shadow. Not a human form or voice troubled the serenity of the spot. On a stone bench against the shady wall Aristide and Mrs. Ducksmith sat down to rest.

"*Voilà!*" said Aristide. "Here one can suck in all the past like an omelette. They had the feeling for beauty, those old fellows."

"I have wasted twenty years of my life," said Mrs. Ducksmith, with a sigh. "Why didn't I meet someone like you when I was young? Ah, you don't know what my life has been, Mr. Pujol."

"Why not Aristide when we are alone? Why not, Henriette?"

He too had the sense of adventure, and his eyes were more than usually compelling and his voice more seductive. For some reason or other, undivined by Aristide—over-excitement of nerves, perhaps—she burst into tears.

"*Henriette! Henriette, ne pleurez pas.*"

His arm crept round her—he knew not how; her head sank on his shoulder, she knew not why—faithlessness to her lord was as far from her thoughts as murder or arson; but for one poor little moment in a lifetime it is good to weep on someone's shoulder and to have someone's sympathetic arm around one's waist.

"*Pauvre petite femme!* And is it love she is pining for?"

She sobbed; he lifted her chin with his free hand —and what less could mortal apostle do?—he kissed her on her wet cheek.

A bellow like that of an angry bull caused them to start asunder. They looked up, and there was

Mr. Ducksmith within a few yards of them, his face aflame, his rabbit's eyes on fire with rage. He advanced, shook his fists in their faces.

"I've caught you! At last, after twenty years, I've caught you!"

"Monsieur," cried Aristide, starting up, "allow me to explain."

He swept Aristide aside like an intercepting willow-branch, and poured forth a torrent of furious speech upon his wife.

"I have hated you for twenty years. Day by day I have hated you more. I've watched you, watched you, watched you! But, you sly jade, you've been too clever for me till now. Yes; I followed you from the hotel. I dogged you. I foresaw what would happen. Now the end has come. I've hated you for twenty years—ever since you first betrayed me——"

Mrs. Ducksmith, who had sat with overwhelmed head in her hands, started bolt upright, and looked at him like one thunderstruck.

"I betrayed you?" she gasped, in bewilderment. "My God! When? How? What do you mean?"

He laughed—for the first time since Aristide had known him—but it was a ghastly laugh, that made the jowls of his cheeks spread horribly to his ears; and again he flooded the calm, stately courtyard with the raging violence of words. The veneer of easy life fell from him. He became the low-born,

"I'VE CAUGHT YOU! AT LAST, AFTER TWENTY YEARS. I'VE CAUGHT YOU!"

petty tradesman, using the language of the hands of his jam factory. No, he had never told her. He had awaited his chance. Now he had found it. He called her names. . . .

Aristide interposed, his Southern being athrob with the insults heaped upon the woman.

"Say that again, monsieur," he shouted, "and I will take you up in my arms like a sheep and throw you down that well."

The two men glared at one another, Aristide standing bent, with crooked fingers, ready to spring at the other's throat. The woman threw herself between them.

"For Heaven's sake," she cried, "listen to me! I have done no wrong. I have done no wrong now —I never did you wrong, so help me God!"

Mr. Ducksmith laughed again, and his laugh re-echoed round the quiet walls and up the vast staircase of honour.

"You'd be a fool not to say it. But now I've done with you. Here, you, sir. Take her away— do what you like with her; I'll divorce her. I'll give you a thousand pounds never to see her again."

"*Goujat! Triple goujat!*" cried Aristide, more incensed than ever at this final insult.

Mrs. Ducksmith, deadly white, swayed sideways, and Aristide caught her in his arms and dragged her to the stone bench. The fat, heavy man looked

at them for a second, laughed again, and sped through the *porte-cochère*. Mrs. Ducksmith quickly recovered from her fainting attack, and gently pushed the solicitous Aristide away.

"Merciful Heaven!" she murmured. "What is to become of me?"

The last person to answer the question was Aristide. For once in his adventurous life resource failed him. He stared at the woman for whom he cared not the snap of a finger, and who, he knew, cared not the snap of a finger for him, aghast at the havoc he had wrought. If he had set out to arouse emotion in these two sluggish breasts he had done so with a vengeance. He had thought he was amusing himself with a toy cannon, and he had fired a charge of dynamite.

He questioned her almost stupidly—for a man in the comic mask does not readily attune himself to tragedy. She answered with the desolate frankness of a lost soul. And then the whole meaning—or the lack of meaning—of their inanimate lives was revealed to him. Absolute estrangement had followed the birth of their child nearly twenty years ago. The child had died after a few weeks. Since then he saw—and the generous blood of his heart froze as the vision came to him—that the vulgar, half-sentient, rabbit-eyed bloodhound of a man had nursed an unexpressed, dull, implacable resentment against the woman. It did not matter

that the man's suspicion was vain. To Aristide the woman's blank amazement at the preposterous charge was proof enough; to the man the thing was real. For nearly twenty years the man had suffered the cancer to eat away his vitals, and he had watched and watched his blameless wife, until now, at last, he had caught her in this folly. No wonder he could not rest at home; no wonder he was driven, Io-wise, on and on, although he hated travel and all its discomforts, knew no word of a foreign language, knew no scrap of history, had no sense of beauty, was utterly ignorant, as every single one of our expensively State-educated English lower classes is, of everything that matters on God's earth; no wonder that, in the unfamiliarity of foreign lands, feeling as helpless as a ballet-dancer in a cavalry charge, he looked to Cook, or Lunn, or the Agence Pujol to carry him through his uninspired pilgrimage. For twenty years he had shown no sign of joy or sorrow or anger, scarcely even of pleasure or annoyance. A tortoise could not have been more unemotional. The unsuspected volcano had slumbered. To-day came disastrous eruption. And what was a mere laughing, crying child of a man like Aristide Pujol in front of a Ducksmith volcano?

"What is to become of me?" wailed Mrs. Ducksmith again.

"*Ma foi!*" said Aristide, with a shrug of his

shoulders. "What's going to become of anyone? Who can foretell what will happen in a minute's time? *Tiens!*" he added, kindly laying his hand on the sobbing woman's shoulder. "Be comforted, my poor Henriette. Just as nothing in this world is as good as we hope, so nothing is as bad as we fear. *Voyons!* All is not lost yet. We must return to the hotel."

She weepingly acquiesced. They walked through the quiet streets like children whose truancy had been discovered and who were creeping back to condign punishment at school. When they reached the hotel, Mrs. Ducksmith went straight up to the woman's haven, her bedroom.

Aristide tugged at his Vandyke beard in dire perplexity. The situation was too pregnant with tragedy for him to run away and leave the pair to deal with it as best they could. But what was he to do? He sat down in the vestibule and tried to think. The landlord, an unstoppable gramophone of garrulity, entering by the street-door and bearing down upon him, put him to flight. He, too, sought his bedroom, a cool apartment with a balcony outside the French window. On this balcony, which stretched along the whole range of first-floor bedrooms, he stood for a while, pondering deeply. Then, in an absent way, he overstepped the limit of his own room-frontage. A queer sound startled him. He paused, glanced through the open

THERE HE SAW A SIGHT WHICH FOR THE MOMENT PARALYZED HIM

window, and there he saw a sight which for the moment paralyzed him.

Recovering command of his muscles, he tip-toed his way back. He remembered now that the three rooms adjoined. Next to his was Mr. Ducksmith's, and then came Mrs. Ducksmith's. It was Mr. Ducksmith whom he had seen. Suddenly his dark face became luminous with laughter, his eyes glowed, he threw his hat in the air and danced with glee about the room. Having thus worked off the first intoxication of his idea, he flung his few articles of attire and toilet necessaries into his bag, strapped it, and darted, in his dragon-fly way, into the corridor and tapped softly at Mrs. Ducksmith's door. She opened it. He put his finger to his lips.

"Madame," he whispered, bringing to bear on her all the mocking magnetism of his eyes, "if you value your happiness you will do exactly what I tell you. You will obey me implicitly. You must not ask questions. Pack your trunks at once. In ten minutes' time the porter will come for them."

She looked at him with a scared face. "But what am I going to do?"

"You are going to revenge yourself on your husband."

"But I don't want to," she replied, piteously.

"I do," said he. "Begin, *chère madame.* Every moment is precious."

In a state of stupefied terror the poor woman obeyed him. He saw her start seriously on her task and then went downstairs, where he held a violent and gesticulatory conversation with the landlord and with a man in a green baize apron summoned from some dim lair of the hotel. After that he lit a cigarette and smoked feverishly, walking up and down the pavement. In ten minutes' time his luggage with that of Mrs. Ducksmith was placed upon the cab. Mrs. Ducksmith appeared trembling and tear-stained in the vestibule.

The man in the green baize apron knocked at Mr. Ducksmith's door and entered the room.

"I have come for the baggage of monsieur," said he.

"Baggage? What baggage?" asked Mr. Ducksmith, sitting up.

"I have descended the baggage of Monsieur Pujol," said the porter in his stumbling English, "and of madame, and put them in a cab, and I naturally thought monsieur was going away, too."

"Going away!" He rubbed his eyes, glared at the porter, and dashed into his wife's room. It was empty. He dashed into Aristide's room. It was empty, too. Shrieking inarticulate anathema, he rushed downstairs, the man in the green baize apron following at his heels.

Not a soul was in the vestibule. No cab was at

the door. Mr. Ducksmith turned upon his stupefied satellite.

"Where are they?"

"They must have gone already. I filled the cab. Perhaps Monsieur Pujol and madame have gone before to make arrangements."

"Where have they gone to?"

"In Perigueux there is nowhere to go to with baggage but the railway station."

A decrepit vehicle with a gaudy linen canopy hove in sight. Mr. Ducksmith hailed it as the last victims of the Flood must have hailed the Ark. He sprang into it and drove to the station.

There, in the *salle d'attente,* he found Aristide mounting guard over his wife's luggage. He hurled his immense bulk at his betrayer.

"You blackguard! Where is my wife?"

"Monsieur," said Aristide, puffing a cigarette, sublimely impudent and debonair, "I decline to answer any questions. Your wife is no longer your wife. You offered me a thousand pounds to take her away. I am taking her away. I did not deign to disturb you for such a trifle as a thousand pounds, but, since you are here——"

He smiled engagingly and held out his curved palm. Mr. Ducksmith foamed at the corners of the small mouth that disappeared into the bloodhound jowls.

"My wife!" he shouted. "If yóu don't want me to throw you down and trample on you."

A band of loungers, railway officials, peasants, and other travellers awaiting their trains, gathered round. As the altercation was conducted in English, which they did not understand, they could only hope for the commencement of physical hostilities.

"My dear sir," said Aristide, "I do not understand you. For twenty years you hold an innocent and virtuous woman under an infamous suspicion. She meets a sympathetic soul, and you come across her pouring into his ear the love and despair of a lifetime. You have more suspicion. You tell me you will give me a thousand pounds to go away with her. I take you at your word. And now you want to stamp on me. *Ma foi!* it is not reasonable."

Mr. Ducksmith seized him by the lapels of his coat. A gasp of expectation went round the crowd. But Aristide recognized an agonized appeal in the eyes now bloodshot.

"My wife!" he said hoarsely. "I want my wife. I can't live without her. Give her back to me. Where is she?"

"You had better search the station," said Aristide.

The heavy man unconsciously shook him in his powerful grasp, as a child might shake a doll.

"Give her to me! Give her to me, I say! She won't regret it."

MR. DUCKSMITH SEIZED HIM BY THE LAPELS OF HIS COAT

"You swear that?" asked Aristide, with lightning quickness.

"I swear it, by God! Where is she?"

Aristide disengaged himself, waved his hand airily towards Perigueux, and smiled blandly.

"In the salon of the hotel, waiting for you to prostrate yourself on your knees before her."

Mr. Ducksmith gripped him by the arm.

"Come back with me. If you're lying I'll kill you."

"The luggage?" queried Aristide.

"Confound the luggage!" said Mr. Ducksmith, and dragged him out of the station.

A cab brought them quickly to the hotel. Mr. Ducksmith bolted like an obese rabbit into the salon. A few moments afterwards Aristide, entering, found them locked in each other's arms.

They started alone for England that night, and Aristide returned to the directorship of the Agence Pujol. But he took upon himself enormous credit for having worked a miracle.

"One thing I can't understand," said I, after he had told me the story, "is what put this sham elopement into your crazy head. What did you see when you looked into Mr. Ducksmith's bedroom?"

"Ah, *mon vieux,* I did not tell you. If I had told you, you would not have been surprised at what I did. I saw a sight that

would have melted the heart of a stone. I saw Ducksmith wallowing on his bed and sobbing as if his heart would break. It filled my soul with pity. I said: 'If that mountain of insensibility can weep and sob in such agony, it is because he loves —and it is I, Aristide, who have reawakened that love.' "

"Then," said I, "why on earth didn't you go and fetch Mrs. Ducksmith and leave them together?"

He started from his chair and threw up both hands.

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried he. "You English! You are a charming people, but you have no romance. You have no dramatic sense. I will help myself to a whisky and soda."

VIII

THE ADVENTURE OF THE FICKLE GODDESS

IT may be remembered that Aristide Pujol had aged parents, browned and wrinkled children of the soil, who had passed all their days in the desolation of Aigues-Mortes, the little fortified, derelict city in the salt marshes of Provence. Although they regarded him with the same unimaginative wonder as a pair of alligators might regard an Argus butterfly, their undoubted but freakish progeny, and although Aristide soared high above their heads in all phases of thought and emotion, the mutual ties remained strong and perdurable. Scarcely a year passed without Aristide struggling somehow south to visit *ses vieux,* as he affectionately called them, and whenever Fortune shed a few smiles on him, one or two at least were sure to find their way to Aigues-Mortes in the shape of, say, a silver-mounted umbrella for his father or a deuce of a Paris hat for the old lady's Sunday wear. Monsieur and Madame Pujol had a sacred museum of these unused objects—the pride of their

lives. Aristide was entirely incomprehensible, but he was a good son. A bad son in France is rare.

But once Aristide nearly killed his old people outright. An envelope from him contained two large caressive slips of bluish paper, which when scrutinized with starting eyes turned out to be two one-thousand-franc notes. Mon Dieu! What had happened? Had Aristide been robbing the Bank of France? They stood paralyzed and only recovered motive force when a neighbour suggested their reading the accompanying letter. It did not explain things very clearly. He was in Aix-les-Bains, a place which they had never heard of, making his fortune. He was staying at the Hôtel de l'Europe, where Queen Victoria (they had heard of Queen Victoria) had been contented to reside, he was a glittering figure in a splendid beau-monde, and if *ses vieux* would buy a few cakes and a bottle of vin cacheté with the enclosed trifle, to celebrate his prosperity, he would deem it the privilege of a devoted son. But Pujol senior, though wondering where the devil he had fished all that money from, did not waste it in profligate revelry. He took the eighty pounds to the bank and exchanged the perishable paper for one hundred solid golden louis which he carried home in a bag curiously bulging beneath his woollen jersey and secreted it with the savings of his long life in the mattress of the conjugal bed.

"If only he hasn't stolen it," sighed the mother.

"What does it matter, since it is sewn up there all secure?" said the old man. "No one can find it."

The Provençal peasant is as hard-headed and practical as a Scottish miner, and if left alone by the fairies would produce no imaginative effect whatever upon his generation; but in his progeniture he is more preposterously afflicted with changelings than any of his fellows the world over, which, though ethnologically an entirely new proposition, accounts for a singular number of things and *inter alia* for my dragon-fly friend, Aristide Pujol.

Now, Aristide, be it said at the outset, had not stolen the money. It (and a vast amount more) had been honestly come by. He did not lie when he said that he was staying at the Hôtel de l'Europe, Aix-les-Bains, honoured by the late Queen Victoria (pedantic accuracy requires the correction that the august lady rented the annexe, the Villa Victoria, on the other side of the shady way—but no matter—an hotel and its annexe are the same thing) nor did he lie in boasting of his prodigious prosperity. Aristide was in clover. For the first, and up to now as I write, the only, time in his life he realized the gorgeous visions of pallid years. He was leading the existence of the amazing rich. He could drink champagne—not your miserable *tisane* at five francs a quart—but real champagne,

with year of vintage and *gôut américan* or *gôut anglais* marked on label, fabulously priced; he could dine lavishly at the Casino restaurants or at Nikola's, prince of restaurateurs, among the opulent and the fair; he could clothe himself in attractive raiment; he could step into a fiacre and bid the man drive and not care whither he went or what he paid; he could also distribute five-franc pieces to lame beggars. He scattered his money abroad with both hands, according to his expansive temperament; and why not, when he was drawing wealth out of an inexhaustible fount? The process was so simple, so sure. All you had to do was to believe in the cards on which you staked your money. If you knew you were going to win, you won. Nothing could be easier.

He had drifted into Aix-les-Bains from Geneva on the lamentable determination of a commission agency in the matter of some patent fuel, with a couple of louis in his pocket forlornly jingling the tale of his entire fortune. As this was before the days when you had to exhibit certificates of baptism, marriage, sanity and bank-balance before being allowed to enter the baccarat rooms, Aristide paid his two francs and made a bee line for the tables. I am afraid Aristide was a gambler. He was never so happy as when taking chances; his whole life was a gamble, with Providence holding the bank. Before the night was over he had converted his two

louis into fifty. The next day they became five hundred. By the end of a week his garments were wadded with bank notes whose value amounted to a sum so stupendous as to be beyond need of computation. He was a celebrity in the place and people nudged each other as he passed by. And Aristide passed by with a swagger, his head high and the end of his pointed beard sticking joyously up in the air.

We see him one August morning, in the plenitude of his success, lounging in a wicker chair on the shady lawn of the Hôtel de l'Europe. He wore white buckskin shoes—I begin with these as they were the first point of his person to attract the notice of the onlooker—lilac silk socks, a white flannel suit with a zig-zag black stripe, a violet tie secured by a sapphire and diamond pin, and a rakish panama hat. On his knees lay the *Matin;* the fingers of his left hand held a fragrant corona; his right hand was uplifted in a gesture, for he was talking. He was talking to a couple of ladies who sat near by, one a mild-looking Englishwoman of fifty, dressed in black, the other, her daughter, a beautiful girl of twenty-four. That Aristide should fly to feminine charms, like moth to candle, was a law of his being; that he should lie, with shriveled wings, at Miss Errington's feet was the obvious result. Her charms were of the winsome kind to which he was most susceptible. She had an oval

face, a little mouth like crumpled rose petals (so Aristide himself described it), a complexion the mingling of ivory and peach blossom (Aristide again), a straight little nose, appealing eyes of the deepest blue veiled by sweeping lashes and fascinating fluffiness of dark hair over a pure brow. She had a graceful figure, and the slender foot below her white piqué skirt was at once the envy and admiration of Aix-les-Bains.

Aristide talked. The ladies listened, with obvious amusement. In the easy hotel way he had fallen into their acquaintance. As the man of wealth, the careless player who took five-hundred-louis banks at the table with the five-louis minimum, and cleared out the punt, he felt it necessary to explain himself. I am afraid he deviated from the narrow path of truth.

"What perfect English you speak," Miss Errington remarked, when he had finished his harangue and had put the corona between his lips. Her voice was a soft contralto.

"I have mixed much in English society, since I was a child," replied Aristide, in his grandest manner. "Fortune has made me know many of your county families and members of Parliament."

Miss Errington laughed. "Our M. P's are rather a mixed lot, Monsieur Pujol."

"To me an English Member of Parliament is a

high-bred conservative. I do not recognize the others," said Aristide.

"Unfortunately we have to recognize them," said the elder lady with a smile.

"Not socially, madame. They exist as mechanical factors of the legislative machine; but that is all." He swelled as if the blood of the Montmorencys and the Colignys boiled in his veins. "We do not ask them into our drawing rooms. We do not allow them to marry our daughters. We only salute them with cold politeness when we pass them in the street."

"It's astonishing," said Miss Errington, "how strongly the aristocratic principle exists in republican France. Now, there's our friend, the Comte de Lussigny, for instance——"

A frown momentarily darkened the cloudless brow of Aristide Pujol. He did not like the Comte de Lussigny——

"With Monsieur de Lussigny," he interposed, "it is a matter of prejudice, not of principle."

"And with you?"

"The reasoned philosophy of a life-time, mademoiselle," answered Aristide. He turned to Mrs. Errington.

"How long have you known Monsieur de Lussigny, madame?"

She looked at her daughter. "It was in Monte Carlo the winter before last, wasn't it, Betty?

Since then we have met him frequently in England and Paris. We came across him, just lately, at Trouville. I think he's charming, don't you?"

"He's a great gambler," said Aristide.

Betty Errington laughed again. "But so are you. So is mamma. So am I, in my poor little way."

"We gamble for amusement," said Aristide loftily.

"I'm sure I don't," cried Miss Betty, with merry eyes—and she looked adorable— "When I put my despised five-franc piece down on the table I want desperately to win, and when the horrid croupier rakes it up I want to hit him—Oh! I want to hit him hard."

"And when you win?"

"I'm afraid I don't think of the croupier at all," said Miss Betty.

Her mother smiled indulgently and exchanged a glance with Aristide. This pleased him; there was an agreeable little touch of intimacy in it. It confirmed friendly relations with the mother. What were his designs as regards the daughter he did not know. They were not evil, certainly. For all his southern blood, Latin traditions and devil-may-care upbringing, Aristide, though perhaps not reaching our divinely set and therefore unique English standard of morality, was a decent soul; further, partly through his pedagogic sojourn among them, and

partly through his childish adoration of the frank, fair-cheeked, northern goddesses talking the quick, clear speech, who passed him by when he was a hunted little devil of a *chasseur* in the Marseilles café, he had acquired a peculiarly imaginative reverence for English girls. The reverence, indeed, extended to English ladies generally. Owing to the queer circumstances of his life they were the only women of a class above his own, with whom he had associated on terms of equality. He had, then, no dishonorable designs as regards Miss Betty Errington. On the other hand, the thoughts of marriage had as yet not entered his head. You see, a Frenchman and an Englishman or an American, view marriage from entirely different angles. The Anglo-Saxon of honest instincts, attracted towards a pretty girl at once thinks of the possibilities of marriage; if he finds them infinitely remote, he makes romantic love to her in the solitude of his walks abroad or of his sleepless nights, and, in her presence, is as dumb and dismal as a freshly hooked trout. The equally honest Gaul does nothing of the kind. The attraction in itself is a stimulus to adventure. He makes love to her, just because it is the nature of a lusty son of Adam to make love to a pretty daughter of Eve. He lives in the present. The rest doesn't matter. He leaves it to chance. I am speaking, be it understood, not of deep passions—that is a different matter alto-

gether—but of the more superficial sexual attractions which we, as a race, take so seriously and puritanically, often to our most disastrous undoing, and which the Latin light-heartedly regards as essential, but transient phenomena of human existence. Aristide made the most respectful love in the world to Betty Errington, because he could not help himself. *"Tonnerre de Dieu!"* he cried when from my Britannic point of view, I talked to him on the subject. "You English whom I try to understand and can never understand are so funny! It would have been insulting to Miss Betty Errington—*tiens!*—a purple hyacinth of spring—that was what she was—not to have made love to her. Love to a pretty woman is like a shower of rain to hyacinths. It passes, it goes. Another one comes. *Qu'importe?* But the shower is necessary—Ah! *sacré gredin,* when will you comprehend?"

All this to make as clear as an Englishman, in the confidence of a changeling child of Provence, can hope to do, the attitude of Aristide Pujol towards the sweet and innocent Betty Errington with her mouth like crumpled rose-petals, her ivory and peach-blossom complexion, her soft contralto voice, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, as per foregoing bald description, and as per what can, by imaginative effort, be pictured from the Pujolic hyperbole, by which I, the unimportant narrator of these chronicles, was dazzled and overwhelmed.

"I'm afraid I don't think of the croupier at all," said Betty.

"Do you think of no one who brings you good fortune?" asked Aristide. He threw the *Matin* on the grass, and, doubling himself up in his chair regarded her earnestly. "Last night you put five louis into my bank——"

"And I won forty. I could have hugged you."

"Why didn't you? Ah!" His arms spread wide and high. "What I have lost!"

"Betty!" cried Mrs. Errington.

"Alas, Madame," said Aristide, "that is the despair of our artificial civilization. It prohibits so much spontaneous expression of emotion."

"You'll forgive me, Monsieur Pujol," said Mrs. Errington dryly, "but I think our artificial civilization has its advantages."

"If you will forgive me, in your turn," said Aristide, "I see a doubtful one advancing."

A man approached the group and with profuse gestures took off a straw hat which he thrust under his right arm, exposing an amazingly flat head on which the closely cropped hair stood brush-fashion upright. He had an insignificant pale face to which a specious individuality was given by a moustache with ends waxed up to the eyes and by a monocle with a tortoise shell rim. He was dressed (his valet had misjudged things—and valets like

the rest of us are fallible) in what was yesterday a fairly white flannel suit.

"Madame—Mademoiselle." He shook hands with charming grace. "Monsieur." He bowed stiffly. Aristide doffed his Panama hat with adequate ceremony. "May I be permitted to join you?"

"With pleasure, Monsieur de Lussigny," said Mrs. Errington.

Monsieur de Lussigny brought up a chair and sat down.

"What time did you get to bed, last night?" asked Betty Errington. She spoke excellently pure French, and so did her mother.

"Soon after we parted, mademoiselle, quite early for me but late for you. And you look this morning as if you had gone to bed at sundown and got up at dawn."

Miss Betty's glance responsive to the compliment filled Aristide with wrath. What right had the Comte de Lussigny, a fellow who consorted with Brazilian Rastaquouères and perfumed Levantine nondescripts, to win such a glance from Betty Errington?

"If Mademoiselle can look so fresh," said he, "in the artificial atmosphere of Aix, what is there of adorable that she must not resemble in the innocence of her Somersetshire home?"

"You cannot imagine it, Monsieur," said the Count; "but I have had the privilege to see it."

"I hope Monsieur Pujol will visit us also in our country home, when we get back," said Mrs. Errington with intent to pacificate. "It is modest, but it is old-world and has been in our family for hundreds of years."

"Ah, these old English homes!" said Aristide.

"Would you care to hear about it?"

"I should," said he.

He drew his chair courteously a foot or so nearer that of the mild lady; Monsieur de Lussigny took instant advantage of the move to establish himself close to Miss Betty. Aristide turned one ear politely to Mrs. Errington's discourse, the other ragingly and impotently to the whispered conversation between the detached pair.

Presently a novel fell from the lady's lap. Aristide sprang to his feet and restored it. He remained standing. Mrs. Errington consulted a watch. It was nearing lunch time. She rose, too. Aristide took her a pace or two aside.

"My dear Mrs. Errington," said he, in English. "I do not wish to be indiscreet—but you come from your quiet home in Somerset and your beautiful daughter is so young and inexperienced, and I am a man of the world who has mingled in all the society of Europe—may I warn you against admitting the Comte de Lussigny too far into your intimacy."

She turned an anxious face. "Monsieur Pujol, is there anything against the Count?"

Aristide executed the large and expressive shrug of the Southerner.

"I play high at the tables for my amusement—I know the principal players, people of high standing. Among them Monsieur de Lussigny's reputation is not spotless."

"You alarm me very much," said Mrs. Errington, troubled.

"I only put you on your guard," said he.

The others who had risen and followed, caught them up. At the entrance to the hotel the ladies left the men elaborately saluting. The latter, alone, looked at each other.

"Monsieur."

"Monsieur."

Each man raised his hat, turned on his heel and went his way. Aristide betook himself to the café on the Place Carnot on the side of the square facing the white Etablissement des Bains, with a stern sense of having done his duty. It was monstrous that this English damask rose should fall a prey to so detestable a person as the Comte de Lussigny. He suspected him of disgraceful things. If only he had proof. Fortune, ever favoring him, stood at his elbow. She guided him straight to a table in the front row of the terrace where sat a black-haired, hard-featured though comely youth deep

in thought, in front of an untouched glass of beer. At Aristide's approach he raised his head, smiled, nodded and said: "Good morning, sir. Will you join me?"

Aristide graciously accepted the invitation and sat down. The young man was another hotel acquaintance, one Eugene Miller of Atlanta, Georgia, a curious compound of shrewdness and simplicity, to whom Aristide had taken a fancy. He was twenty-eight and ran a colossal boot-factory in partnership with another youth and had a consuming passion for stained-glass windows. From books he knew every square foot of old stained-glass in Europe. But he had crossed the Atlantic for the first time only six weeks before, and having indulged his craving immoderately, had rested for a span at Aix-les-Bains to recover from æsthetic indigestion. He had found these amenities agreeable to his ingenuous age. He had also, quite recently, come across the Comte de Lussigny. Hence the depth of thought in which Aristide discovered him. Now, the fact that North is North and South is South and that never these twain shall meet is a proposition all too little considered. One of these days when I can retire from the dull but exacting avocation of tea-broking in the City, I think I shall write a newspaper article on the subject. Anyhow, I hold the theory that the Northerners of all nations have a common characteristic and the South-

erners of all nations have a common characteristic, and that it is this common characteristic in each case that makes North seek and understand North and South seek and understand South. I will not go further into the general proposition; but as a particular instance I will state that the American of the South and the Frenchman of the South found themselves in essential sympathy. Eugene Miller had the unfearing frankness of Aristide Pujol.

"I used rather to look down upon Europe as a place where people knew nothing at all," said he. "We're sort of trained to think it's an extinct volcano, but it isn't. It's alive. My God! It's alive. It's Hell in the shape of a Limburger cheese. I wish the whole population of Atlanta, Georgia, would come over and just see. There's a lot to be learned. I thought I knew how to take care of myself, but this tortoise-shell-eyed Count taught me last night that I couldn't. He cleaned me out of twenty-five hundred dollars——"

"How?" asked Aristide, sharply.

"Ecarté."

Aristide brought his hand down with a bang on the table and uttered anathemas in French and Provençal entirely unintelligible to Eugene Miller; but the youth knew by instinct that they were useful, soul-destroying curses and he felt comforted.

"Ecarté! You played ecarté with Lussigny? But my dear young friend, do you know anything of ecarté?"

"Of course," said Miller. "I used to play it as a child with my sisters."

"Do you know the *jeux de règle?*"

"The what?"

"The formal laws of the game—the rules of discards——"

"Never heard of them," said Eugene Miller.

"But they are as absolute as the Code Napoléon," cried Aristide. "You can't play without knowing them. You might as well play chess without knowing the moves."

"Can't help it," said the young man.

"Well, don't play escarté any more."

"I must," said Miller.

"Comment?"

"I must. I've fixed it up to get my revenge this afternoon—in my sitting room at the hotel."

"But it's imbecile!"

The sweep of Aristide's arm produced prismatic chaos among a tray-full of drinks which the waiter was bringing to the family party at the next table. "It's imbecile," he cried, as soon as order was apologetically and pecuniarily restored. "You are a little mutton going to have its wool taken off."

"I've fixed it up," said Miller. "I've never gone

back on an engagement yet in my own country and I'm not going to begin this side."

Aristide argued. He argued during the mechanical absorption of four glasses of *vermouth-cassis*—after which prodigious quantity of black currant syrup he rose and took the Gadarene youth to Nikola's where he continued the argument during déjeuner. Eugene Miller's sole concession was that Aristide should be present at the encounter and, backing his hand, should have the power (given by the rules of the French game) to guide his play. Aristide agreed and crammed his young friend with the *jeux de règle* and *pâté de foie gras.*

The Count looked rather black when he found Aristide Pujol in Miller's sitting room. He could not, however, refuse him admittance to the game. The three sat down, Aristide by Miller's side, so that he could overlook the hand and, by pointing, indicate the cards that it was advisable to play. The game began. Fortune favored Mr. Eugene Miller. The Count's brow grew blacker.

"You are bringing your own luck to our friend, Monsieur Pujol," said he, dealing the cards.

"He needs it," said Aristide.

"Le roi," said the Count, turning up the king.

The Count won the vole, or all five tricks, and swept the stakes towards him. Then, fortune quickly and firmly deserted Mr. Miller. The Count besides being an amazingly fine player, held amaz-

ingly fine hands. The pile of folded notes in front of him rose higher and higher. Aristide tugged at his beard in agitation. Suddenly, as the Count dealt a king as trump card, he sprang to his feet knocking over the chair behind him.

"You cheat, monsieur. You cheat!"

"Monsieur!" cried the outraged dealer.

"What has he done?"

"He has been palming kings and neutralizing the cut. I've been watching. Now I catch him," cried Aristide in great excitement. *"Ah, sale voleur! Maintenant je vous tiens!"*

"Monsieur," said the Comte de Lussigny with dignity, stuffing his winnings into his jacket pocket. "You insult me. It is an infamy. Two of my friends will call upon you."

"And Monsieur Miller and I will kick them over Mont Revard."

"You cannot treat *gens d'honneur* in such a way, monsieur." He turned to Miller, and said haughtily in his imperfect English, "Did you see the cheat, you?"

"I can't say that I did," replied the young man. "On the other hand that torch-light procession of kings doesn't seem exactly natural."

"But you did not see anything! *Bon!*"

"But I saw. Isn't that enough, *hein?*" shouted Aristide brandishing his fingers in the Count's face. "You come here and think there's nothing easier

than to cheat young foreigners who don't know the rules of ecarté. You come here and think you can carry off rich young English misses. Ah, *sale escroc!* You never thought you would have to reckon with Aristide Pujol. You call yourself the Comte de Lussigny. Bah! I know you——" he didn't, but that doesn't matter—"your *dossier* is in the hands of the prefect of Police. I am going to get that *dossier*. Monsieur Lepine is my intimate friend. Every autumn we shoot together. Aha! You send me your two galley-birds and see what I do to them."

The Comte de Lussigny twirled the tips of his moustache almost to his forehead and caught up his hat.

"My friends shall be officers in the uniform of the French Army," he said, by the door.

"And mine shall be two gendarmes," retorted Aristide. *"Nom de Dieu!"* he cried, after the other had left the room. "We let him take the money!"

"That's of no consequence. He didn't get away with much anyway," said young Miller. "But he would have if you hadn't been here. If ever I can do you a return service, just ask."

Aristide went out to look for the Erringtons. But they were not to be found. It was only late in the afternoon that he met Mrs. Errington in the hall of the hotel. He dragged her into a corner

and in his impulsive fashion told her everything. She listened white faced, in great distress.

"My daughter's engaged to him. I've only just learned," she faltered.

"Engaged? *Sacrebleu!* Ah, *le goujat!*"—for the second he was desperately, furiously, jealously in love with Betty Errington. *"Ah, le sale type! Voyons!* This engagement must be broken off. At once! You are her mother."

"She will hear of nothing against him."

"You will tell her this. It will be a blow; but——"

Mrs. Errington twisted a handkerchief between helpless fingers. "Betty is infatuated. She won't believe it." She regarded him piteously. "Oh, Monsieur Pujol, what can I do? You see she has an independent fortune and is over twenty-one. I am powerless."

"I will meet his two friends," exclaimed Aristide magnificently—"and I will kill him. *Voilà!*"

"Oh, a duel? No! How awful!" cried the mild lady horror-stricken.

He thrust his cane dramatically through a sheet of a newspaper, which he had caught up from a table. "I will run him through the body like that" —Aristide had never handled a foil in his life— "and when he is dead, your beautiful daughter will thank me for having saved her from such an execrable fellow."

"But you mustn't fight. It would be too dreadful. Is there no other way?"

"You must consult first with your daughter," said Aristide.

He dined in the hotel with Eugene Miller. Neither the Erringtons nor the Comte de Lussigny were anywhere to be seen. After dinner, however, he found the elder lady waiting for him in the hall. They walked out into the quiet of the garden. She had been too upset to dine, she explained, having had a terrible scene with Betty. Nothing but absolute proofs of her lover's iniquity would satisfy her. The world was full of slanderous tongues; the noblest and purest did not escape. For herself, she had never been comfortable with the Comte de Lussigny. She had noticed too that he had always avoided the best French people in hotels. She would give anything to save her daughter. She wept.

"And the unhappy girl has written him compromising letters," she lamented.

"They must be got back."

"But how? Oh, Monsieur Pujol, do you think he would take money for them?"

"A scoundrel like that would take money for his dead mother's shroud," said Aristide.

"A thousand pounds?"

She looked very haggard and helpless beneath the blue arc-lights. Aristide's heart went out to

her. He knew her type—the sweet gentlewoman of rural England who comes abroad to give her pretty daughter a sight of life, ingenuously confident that foreign watering-places are as innocent as her own sequestered village.

"That is much money, *chère madame,*" said Aristide.

"I am fairly well off," said Mrs. Errington.

Aristide reflected. At the offer of a smaller sum the Count would possibly bluff. But to a Knight of Industry, as he knew the Count to be, a certain thousand pounds would be a great temptation. And after all to a wealthy Englishwoman what was a thousand pounds?

"Madame," said he, "if you offer him a thousand pounds for the letters, and a written confession that he is not the Comte de Lussigny, but a common adventurer, I stake my reputation that he will accept."

They walked along for a few moments in silence; the opera had begun at the adjoining Villa des Fleurs and the strains floated through the still August air. After a while she halted and laid her hand on his sleeve.

"Monsieur Pujol, I have never been faced with such a thing, before. Will you undertake for me this delicate and difficult business?"

"Madame," said he, "my life is at the service of yourself and your most exquisite daughter."

She pressed his hand. "Thank God, I've got a friend in this dreadful place," she said brokenly. "Let me go in." And when they reached the lounge, she said, "Wait for me here."

She entered the lift. Aristide waited. Presently the lift descended and she emerged with a slip of paper in her hand.

"Here is a bearer cheque, Monsieur Pujol, for a thousand pounds. Get the letters and the confession if you can, and a mother's blessing will go with you."

She left him and went upstairs again in the lift. Aristide athirst with love, living drama and unholy hatred of the Comte de Lussigny, cocked his black, soft-felt evening hat at an engaging angle on his head and swaggered into the Villa des Fleurs. As he passed the plebeian crowd round the petits-chevaux table—these were the days of little horses and not the modern equivalent of *la boule*—he threw a louis on the square marked 5, waited for the croupier to push him his winnings, seven louis and his stake on the little white horse, and walked into the baccarat room. A bank was being called for thirty louis at the end table.

"Quarante," said Aristide.

"Ajugé à quarante louis," cried the croupier, no one bidding higher.

Aristide took the banker's seat and put down his forty louis. Looking round the long table he saw

the Comte de Lussigny sitting in the punt. The two men glared at each other defiantly. Someone went "banco." Aristide won. The fact of his holding the bank attracted a crowd round the table. The regular game began. Aristide won, lost, won again. Now it must be explained, without going into the details of the game, that the hand against the bank is played by the members of the punt in turn.

Suddenly, before dealing the cards, Aristide asked, *"A qui la main?"*

"C'est à Monsieur," said the croupier, indicating Lussigny.

"Il y a une suite," said Aristide, signifying, as was his right, that he would retire from the bank with his winnings. "The face of that gentleman does not please me."

There was a hush at the humming table. The Count grew dead white and looked at his finger-nails. Aristide superbly gathered up his notes and gold, and tossing a couple of louis to the croupiers, left the table, followed by all eyes. It was one of the thrilling moments of Aristide's life. He had taken the stage, commanded the situation. He had publicly offered the Comte de Lussigny the most deadly insult and the Comte de Lussigny sat down beneath it like a lamb. He swaggered slowly through the crowded room, twirling his moustache, and went into the cool of the moonlit deserted

garden beyond, where he waited gleefully. He had a puckish knowledge of human nature. After a decent interval, and during the absorbing interest of the newly constituted bank, the Comte de Lussigny slipped unnoticed from the table and went in search of Aristide. He found him smoking a large corona and lounging in one wicker chair with his feet on another, beside a very large whisky and soda.

"Ah, it's you," said he without moving.

"Yes," said the Count furiously.

"I haven't yet had the pleasure of kicking your friends over Mont Revard," said Aristide.

"Look here, *mon petit,* this has got to finish," cried the Count.

"*Parfaitement.* I should like nothing better than to finish. But let us finish like well-bred people," said Aristide suavely. "We don't want the whole Casino as witnesses. You'll find a chair over there. Bring it up."

He was enjoying himself immensely. The Count glared at him, turned and banged a chair over by the side of the table.

"Why do you insult me like this?"

"Because," said Aristide, "I've talked by telephone this evening with my good friend Monsieur Lepine, Prefect of Police of Paris."

"You lie," said the Count.

"*Vous verrez.* In the meantime, perhaps we

might have a little conversation. Will you have a whisky and soda? It is one of my English habits."

"No," said the Count emphatically.

"You permit me then?" He drank a great draught. "You are wrong. It helps to cool one's temper. *Eh bien*, let us talk."

He talked. He put before the Count the situation of the beautiful Miss Errington. He conducted the scene like the friend of the family whose astuteness he had admired as a boy in the melodramas that found their way to Marseilles.

"Look," said he, at last, having vainly offered from one hundred to eight hundred pounds for poor Betty Errington's compromising letters. "Look ——" He drew the cheque from his note-case. "Here are twenty-five thousand francs. The signature is that of the charming Madame Errington herself. The letters, and a little signed word, just a little word. 'Mademoiselle, I am a *chevalier d'industrie*. I have a wife and five children. I am not worthy of you. I give you back your promise.' Just that. And twenty-five thousand francs, *mon ami*."

"Never in life!" exclaimed the Count rising. "You continue to insult me."

Aristide for the first time abandoned his lazy and insolent attitude and jumped to his feet.

"And I'll continue to insult you, *canaille* that you are, all through that room," he cried, with

a swift-flung gesture towards the brilliant doorway. "You are dealing with Aristide Pujol. Will you never understand? The letters and a confession for twenty-five thousand francs."

"Never in life," said the Count, and he moved swiftly away.

Aristide caught him by the collar as he stood on the covered terrace, a foot or two from the threshold of the gaming-room.

"I swear to you, I'll make a scandal that you won't survive."

The Count stopped and pushed Aristide's hand away.

"I admit nothing," said he. "But you are a gambler and so am I. I will play you for those documents against twenty-five thousand francs."

"Eh?" said Aristide, staggered for the moment.

The Comte de Lussigny repeated his proposition.

"Bon," said Aristide. *"Tres bon. C'est entendu. C'est fait."*

If Beelzebub had arisen and offered to play beggar-my-neighbour for his soul, Aristide would have agreed; especially after the large whisky and soda and the Mumm Cordon Rouge and the Napoleon brandy which Eugene Miller had insisted on his drinking at dinner.

"I have a large room at the hotel," said he.

"I will join you," said the Count. "Monsieur,"

he took off his hat very politely. "Go first. I will be there in three minutes."

Aristide trod on air during the two minutes' walk to the Hôtel de l'Europe. At the bureau he ordered a couple of packs of cards and a supply of drinks and went to his palatial room on the ground floor. In a few moments the Comte de Lussigny appeared. Aristide offered him a two francs corona which was ceremoniously accepted. Then he tore the wrapping off one of the packs of cards and shuffled.

"Monsieur," said he, still shuffling. "I should like to deal two hands at ecarté. It signifies nothing. It is an experiment. Will you cut?"

"Volontiers," said the Count.

Aristide took up the pack, dealt three cards to the Count, three cards to himself, two cards to the Count, two to himself and turned up the King of Hearts as the eleventh card.

"Monsieur," said he, "expose your hand and I will expose mine."

Both men threw their hands face uppermost on the table. Aristide's was full of trumps, the Count's of valueless cards.

He looked at his adversary with his roguish, triumphant smile. The Count looked at him darkly.

"The ordinary card player does not know how to deal like that," he said with sinister significance.

"But I am not ordinary in anything, my dear

sir," laughed Aristide, in his large boastfulness. "If I were, do you think I would have agreed to your absurd proposal? *Voyons,* I only wanted to show you that in dealing cards I am your equal. Now, the letters——" The Count threw a small packet on the table. "You will permit me? I do not wish to read them. I verify only. Good," said he. "And the confession?"

"What you like," said the Count, coldly. Aristide scribbled a few lines that would have been devastating to the character of a Hyrcanean tiger and handed the paper and fountain pen to the Count.

"Will you sign?"

The Count glanced at the words and signed.

"Voilà," said Aristide, laying Mrs. Errington's cheque beside the documents. "Now let us play. The best of three games?"

"Good," said the Count. "But you will excuse me, monsieur, if I claim to play for ready money. The cheque will take five days to negotiate and if I lose, I shall evidently have to leave Aix to-morrow morning."

"That's reasonable," said Aristide.

He drew out his fat note-case and counted twenty-five one-thousand-franc notes on to the table. And then began the most exciting game of cards he had ever played. In the first place he was playing with another person's money for a fan-

tastic stake, a girl's honour and happiness. Secondly he was pitted against a master of ecarté. And thirdly he knew that his adversary would cheat if he could and that his adversary suspected him of fraudulent designs. So as they played, each man craned his head forward and looked at the other man's fingers with fierce intensity.

Aristide lost the first game. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. In the second game, he won the vole in one hand. The third and final game began. They played slowly, carefully, with keen quick eyes. Their breathing came hard. The Count's lips parted beneath his uptwisted moustache showed his teeth like a cat's. Aristide lost sense of all outer things in the thrill of the encounter. They snarled the stereotyped phrases necessary for the conduct of the game. At last the points stood at four for Aristide and three for his adversary. It was Aristide's deal. Before turning up the eleventh card he paused for the fraction of a second. If it was the King, he had won. He flicked it neatly face upward. It was not the King.

"J'en donne."

"Non. Le roi."

The Count played and marked the King. Aristide had no trumps. The game was lost.

He sat back white, while the Count smiling gathered up the bank-notes.

"And now, Monsieur Pujol," said he impudently,

"I am willing to sell you this rubbish for the cheque."

Aristide jumped to his feet. "Never!" he cried. Madness seized him. Regardless of the fact that he had nothing like another thousand pounds left wherewith to repay Mrs. Errington if he lost, he shouted: "I will play again for it. Not ecarté. One cut of the cards. Ace lowest."

"All right," said the Count.

"Begin, you."

Aristide watched his hand like a cat, as he cut. He cut an eight. Aristide gave a little gasp of joy and cut quickly. He held up a Knave and laughed aloud. Then he stopped short as he saw the Count about to pounce on the documents and the cheque. He made a swift movement and grabbed them first, the other man's hand on his.

"Canaille!"

He dashed his free hand into the adventurer's face. The man staggered back. Aristide pocketed the precious papers. The Count scowled at him for an undecided second, and then bolted from the room.

"Whew!" said Aristide, sinking into his chair and wiping his face. "That was a narrow escape."

He looked at his watch. It was only ten o'clock. It had seemed as if his game with Lussigny had lasted for hours. He could not go to bed and stood confronted with anti-climax. After a while

he went in search of Eugene Miller and having found him in solitary meditation on stained glass windows in the dim-lit grounds of the Villa, sat down by his side and for the rest of the evening poured his peculiar knowledge of Europe into the listening ear of the young man from Atlanta.

On the following morning, as soon as he was dressed, he learned from the Concierge that the Comte de Lussigny had left for Paris by the early train.

"Good," said Aristide.

A little later Mrs. Errington met him in the lounge and accompanied him to the lawn where they had sat the day before.

"I have no words to thank you, Monsieur Pujol," she said with tears in her eyes. "I have heard how you shamed him at the tables. It was brave of you."

"It was nothing." He shrugged his shoulders as if he were in the habit of doing deeds like that every day of his life. "And your exquisite daughter, Madame?"

"Poor Betty! She is prostrate. She says she will never hold up her head again. Her heart is broken."

"It is young and will be mended," said Aristide.

She smiled sadly. "It will be a question of time. But she is grateful to you, Monsieur Pujol. She

realizes from what a terrible fate you have saved her." She sighed. There was a brief silence.

"After this," she continued, "a further stay in Aix would be too painful. We have decided to take the Savoy express this evening and get back to our quiet home in Somerset."

"Ah, madame," said Aristide earnestly. "And shall I not have the pleasure of seeing the charming Miss Betty again?"

"You will come and stay with us in September. Let me see? The fifteenth. Why not fix a date? You have my address? No? Will you write it down?" she dictated: "Wrotesly Manor, Burnholme, Somerset. There I'll try to show you how grateful I am."

She extended her hand. He bowed over it and kissed it in his French way and departed a very happy man.

The Erringtons left that evening. Aristide waylaid them as they were entering the hotel omnibus, with a preposterous bouquet of flowers which he presented to Betty, whose pretty face was hidden by a motor-veil. He bowed, laid his hand on his heart and said: *"Adieu, mademoiselle."*

"No," she said in a low voice, but most graciously, *"Au revoir,* Monsieur Pujol."

For the next few days Aix seemed to be tame and colourless. In an inexplicable fashion, too, it had become unprofitable. Aristide no longer knew

that he was going to win; and he did not win. He lost considerably. So much so that on the morning when he was to draw the cash for the cheque, at the Crédit Lyonnais, he had only fifty pounds and some odd silver left. Aristide looking at the remainder rather ruefully made a great resolution. He would gamble no more. Already he was richer than he had ever been in his life. He would leave Aix. *Tiens!* why should he not go to his good friends the Bocardons at Nîmes, bringing with him a gold chain for Bocardon and a pair of ear-rings for the adorable Zette? There he would look about him. He would use the thousand pounds as a stepping-stone to legitimate fortune. Then he would visit the Erringtons in England, and if the beautiful Miss Betty smiled on him—why, after all, *sacre-bleu* he was an honest man, without a feather on his conscience.

So, jauntily swinging his cane, he marched into the office of the Crédit Lyonnais, went into the inner room and explained his business.

"Ah, your cheque, monsieur, that we were to collect. I am sorry. It has come back from the London bankers."

"How come back?"

"It has not been honoured. See, monsieur. 'Not known. No account.'" The cashier pointed to the grim words across the cheque.

"Comprends pas," faltered Aristide.

"It means that the person who gave you the cheque has no account at this bank."

Aristide took the cheque and looked at it in a dazed way.

"Then I do not get my twenty-five thousand francs?"

"Evidently not," said the cashier.

Aristide stood for a while stunned. What did it mean? His thousand pounds could not be lost. It was impossible. There was some mistake. It was an evil dream. With a heavy weight on the top of his head, he went out of the Crédit Lyonnais and mechanically crossed the little street separating the Bank from the café on the Place Carnot. There he sat stupidly and wondered. The waiter hovered in front of him. *"Monsieur désire?"* Aristide waved him away absently. Yes, it was some mistake. Mrs. Errington in her agitation must have used the wrong cheque book. But even rich English people do not carry about with them a circulating library assortment of cheque books. It was incomprehensible—and meanwhile, his thousand pounds. . . .

The little square blazed before him in the August sunshine. Opposite flashed the white mass of the Etablissement des Bains. There was the old Roman Arch of Titus, gray and venerable. There were the trees of the gardens in riotous greenery. There on the right marking the hour of eleven on its

black face was the clock of the Comptoir National. It was Aix; familiar Aix; not a land of dreams. And there coming rapidly across from the Comptoir National was the well knit figure of the young man from Atlanta.

"Nom de Dieu," murmured Aristide. *"Nom de Dieu de nom de Dieu!"*

Eugene Miller, in a fine frenzy, threw himself into a chair beside Aristide.

"See here. Can you understand this?"

He thrust into his hand a pink strip of paper. It was a cheque for a hundred pounds, made payable to Eugene Miller, Esquire, signed by Mary Errington, and marked "Not known. No account."

"Tonnerre de Dieu!" cried Aristide "How did you get this?"

"How did I get it? I cashed it for her—the day she went away. She said urgent affairs summoned her from Aix—no time to wire for funds—wanted to pay her hotel bill—and she gave me the address of her old English home in Somerset and invited me to come there in September. Fifteenth of September. Said that you were coming. And now I've got a bum cheque. I guess I can't wander about this country alone. I need blinkers and harness and a man with a whip."

He went on indignantly. Aristide composed his face into an expression of parental interest; but within him there was shivering and sickening up-

heaval. He saw it all, the whole mocking drama. . . .

He, Aristide Pujol, was the most sweetly, the most completely swindled man in France.

The Comte de Lussigny, the mild Mrs. Errington and the beautiful Betty were in league together and had exquisitely plotted. They had conspired, as soon as he had accused the Count of cheating. The rascal must have gone straight to them from Miller's room. No wonder that Lussigny, when insulted at the tables, had sat like a tame rabbit and had sought him in the garden. No wonder he had accepted the accusation of adventurer. No wonder he had refused to play for the cheque which he knew to be valueless. But why, thought Aristide, did he not at once consent to sell the papers on the stipulation that he should be paid in notes? Aristide found an answer. He wanted to get everything for nothing, afraid of the use that Aristide might make of a damning confession, and also relying for success on his manipulation of the cards. Finally he had desired to get hold of a dangerous cheque. In that he had been foiled. But the trio has got away with his thousand pounds, his wonderful thousand pounds. He reflected, still keeping an attentive eye on young Eugene Miller and interjecting a sympathetic word, that after he had paid his hotel bill, he would be as poor on quitting Aix-les-Bains as he was when

he had entered it. *Sic transit.* . . . As it was in the beginning with Aristide Pujol, is now and ever shall be. . . .

"But I have my clothes—such clothes as I've never had in my life," thought Aristide. "And a diamond and sapphire tie-pin and a gold watch, and all sorts of other things. *Tron de l'air,* I'm still rich."

"Who would have thought she was like that?" said he. "And a hundred pounds, too. A lot of money."

For nothing in the world would he have confessed himself a fellow-victim.

"I don't care a cent for the hundred pounds," cried the young man. "Our factory turns out seven hundred and sixty-seven million pairs of boots per annum." (Aristide, not I, is responsible for the statistics.) "But I have a feeling that in this hoary country I'm just a little toddling child. And I hate it. I do, sir. I want a nurse to take me round."

Aristide flashed the lightning of his wit upon the young man from Atlanta, Georgia.

"You do, my dear young friend. I'll be your nurse, at a weekly salary—say a hundred francs—it doesn't matter. We will not quarrel." Eugene Miller was startled. "Yes," said Aristide, with a convincing flourish. "I'll clear robbers and sirens and harpies from your path. I'll show you things

in Europe—from Tromsö to Cap Spartivento that you never dreamed of. I'll lead you to every stained glass window in the world. I know them all."

"I particularly want to see those in the church of St. Sebald in Nuremberg."

"I know them like my pocket," said Aristide. "I will take you there. We start to-day."

"But, Mr. Pujol," said the somewhat bewildered Georgian. "I thought you were a man of fortune."

"I am more than a man. I am a soldier. I am a soldier of Fortune. The fickle goddess has for the moment deserted me. But I am loyal. I have for all worldly goods, two hundred and fifty dollars, with which I shall honorably pay my hotel bill. I say I am a soldier of Fortune. But," he slapped his chest, "I am the only honorable one on the Continent of Europe."

The young man fixed upon him the hard blue eyes, not of the enthusiast for stained glass windows, but of the senior partner in the boot factory of Atlanta, Georgia.

"I believe you," said he. "It's a deal. Shake."

"And now," said Aristide, after having shaken hands, "come and lunch with me at Nikola's for the last time."

He rose, stretched out both arms in a wide gesture and smiled with his irresistible Ancient Mariner's eyes at the young man.

"We lunch. We eat ambrosia. Then we go out together and see the wonderful world through the glass-blood of saints and martyrs and apostles and the good Father Abraham and Louis Quatorze. *Viens, mon cher ami.* It is the dream of my life."

Practically penniless and absolutely disillusioned, the amazing man was radiantly happy.

IX

THE ADVENTURE OF A SAINT MARTIN'S SUMMER

MY good friend Blessington, who is a mighty man in the Bordeaux wine-trade, happening one day to lament the irreparable loss of a deceased employé, an Admirable Crichton of a myriad accomplishments and linguistic attainments whose functions it had been, apparently, to travel about between London, Bordeaux, Marseilles and Algiers, I immediately thought of a certain living and presumably unemployed paragon of my acquaintance.

"I know the very man you're looking for," said I.

"Who is he?"

"He's a kind of human firework," said I, "and his name is Aristide Pujol."

I sketched the man—in my desire to do a good turn to Aristide, perhaps in exaggerated colour.

"Let me have a look at him," said Blessington.

"He may be anywhere on the continent of Europe," said I. "How long can you give me to produce him?"

"A week. Not longer."

"I'll do my best," said I.

By good luck my telegram, sent off about four o'clock, found him at 213 *bis* Rue Saint-Honoré. He had just returned to Paris after some mad dash for fortune (he told me afterwards a wild and disastrous story of a Russian Grand-Duke, a Dancer and a gold mine in the Dolomites) and had once more resumed the dreary conduct of the Agence Pujol at the Hôtel du Soleil et de l'Ecosse. My summons being imperative, he abandoned the Agence Pujol as a cat jumps off a wall, and, leaving the guests of the Hotel guideless, to the indignation of Monsieur Bocardon, whom he had served this trick several times before, paid his good landlady, Madam Bidoux, what he owed her, took a third-class ticket to London, bought, lunatic that he was, a ripe Brie cheese, a foot in diameter, a present to myself, which he carried in his hand most of the journey, and turned up at my house at eight o'clock the next morning with absolutely empty pockets and the happiest and most fascinating smile that ever irradiated the face of man. As a matter of fact, he burst his way past my scandalized valet into my bedroom and woke me up.

"Here I am, my dear friend, and here is something French you love that I have brought you," and he thrust the Brie cheese under my nose.

"— — —," said.

If you were awakened by a Brie cheese, an hour before your time, you would say the same. Aristide sat at the foot of the bed and laughed till the tears ran down his beard.

As soon as it was decent I sent him into the city to interview Blessington. Three hours afterward he returned more radiant than ever. He threw himself into my arms; before I could disentagle myself, he kissed me on both cheeks; then he danced about the room.

"*Me voici,*" he said, "accredited representative of the great Maison Dulau et Compagnie. I have hundreds of pounds a year. I go about. I watch. I control. I see that the Great British Public can assuage its thirst with the pure juice of the grape and not with the dregs of a laboratory. I test vintages. I count barrels. I enter them in books. I smile at Algerian wine growers and say, 'Ha! ha! none of your *petite piquette frélateé* for me but good sound wine.' It is diplomacy. It is as simple as kissing hands. And I have a sustained income. Now I can be *un bon bourgeois* instead of a stray cat. And all due to you, *mon cher ami.* I am grateful—*voyons*—if anybody ever says Aristide Pujol is ungrateful, he is a liar. You believe me! Say you believe me."

He looked at me earnestly.

"I do, old chap," said I.

I had known Aristide for some years, and in all

kinds of little ways he had continuously manifested his gratitude for the trifling service I had rendered him, at our first meeting, in delivering him out of the hands of the horrific Madam Gougasse. That gratitude is the expectation of favors to come was, in the case of Aristide, a cynical and inapplicable proposition. And here, as this (as far as I can see) is the last of Aristide's adventures I have to relate, let me make an honest and considered statement:—

During the course of an interesting and fairly prosperous life, I have made many delightful Bohemian, devil-may-care acquaintances, but among them all Aristide stands as the one bright star who has never asked me to lend him money. I have offered it times without number, but he has refused. I believe there is no man living to whom Aristide is in debt. In the depths of the man's changeling and feckless soul is a principle which has carried him untarnished through many a wild adventure. If he ever accepted money—money to the Provençal peasant is the transcendental materialised, and Aristide (save by the changeling theory) was Provençal peasant bone and blood—it was always for what he honestly thought was value received. If he met a man who wanted to take a mule ride among the Mountains of the Moon, Aristide would at once have offered himself as guide. The man would have paid him; but Aristide, by some quaint spirit-

ual juggling, would have persuaded him that the ascent of Primrose Hill was equal to any lunar achievement, seeing that, himself, Aristide Pujol, was keeper of the Sun, Moon and Seven Stars; and the gift to that man of Aristide's dynamic personality would have been well worth anything that he would have found in the extinct volcano we know to be the moon.

"The only thing I would suggest, if you would allow me to do so," said I, "is not to try to make the fortune of Messrs. Dulau & Co. by some dazzling but devastating *coup* of your own."

He looked at me in his bright, shrewd way. "You think it time I restrained my imagination?"

"Exactly."

"I will read The Times and buy a family Bible," said Aristide.

A week after he had taken up his work in the City, under my friend Blessington, I saw the delighted and prosperous man again. It was a Saturday and he came to lunch at my house.

"*Tiens!*" said he, when he had recounted his success in the office, "it is four years since I was in England?"

"Yes," said I, with a jerk of memory. "Time passes quickly."

"It is three years since I lost little Jean."

"Who is little Jean?" I asked.

"Did I not tell you when I saw you last in Paris?"

"No."

"It is strange. I have been thinking about him and my heart has been aching for him all the time. You must hear. It is most important." He lit a cigar and began.

It was then that he told me the story of which I have already related in these chronicles:* how he was scouring France in a ramshackle automobile as the peripatetic vendor of a patent corn cure and found a babe of nine months lying abandoned in the middle of that silent road through the wilderness between Salon and Arles; how instead of delivering it over to the authorities, he adopted it and carried it about with him from town to town, a motor accessory sometimes embarrassing, but always divinely precious; how an evil day came upon him at Aix-en-Provence when, the wheezing automobile having uttered its last gasp, he found his occupation gone; how, no longer being able to care for *le petit* Jean, he left him with a letter and half his fortune outside the door of a couple of English maiden ladies who, staying in the same hotel, had manifested great interest in the baby and himself; and how, in the dead of the night, he had tramped away from Aix-en-Provence in the rain, his pockets light and his heart as heavy as lead.

* The Adventures of the Foundling.

"And I have never heard of my little Jean again," said Aristide.

"Why didn't you write?" I asked.

"I knew their names, Honeywood; Miss Janet was the elder, Miss Anne the younger. But the name of the place they lived at I have never been able to remember. It was near London—they used to come up by train to matinées and afternoon concerts. But what it is called, *mon Dieu*, I have racked my brain for it. *Sacré mille tonneres!*" He leaped to his feet in his unexpected, startling way, and pounced on a Bradshaw's Railway Guide lying on my library table. "Imbecile, pig, triple ass that I am! Why did I not think of this before? It is near London. If I look through all the stations near London on every line, I shall find it."

"All right," said I, "go ahead."

I lit a cigarette and took up a novel. I had not read very far when a sudden uproar from the table caused me to turn round. Aristide danced and flourished the Bradshaw over his head.

"Chislehurst! Chislehurst! Ah, *mon ami*, now I am happy. Now I have found my little Jean. You will forgive me—but I must go now and embrace him."

He held out his hand.

"Where are you off to?" I demanded.

"The Chislehurst, where else?"

"My dear fellow," said I, rising, "do you seriously suppose that these two English maiden ladies have taken on themselves the responsibility of that foreign brat's upbringing?"

"Mon Dieu!" said he taken aback for the moment, hypothesis having entered his head. Then, with a wide gesture, he flung the preposterous idea to the winds. "Of course. They have hearts, these English women. They have maternal instincts. They have money." He looked at Bradshaw again, then at his watch. "I have just time to catch a train. *Au revoir, mon vieux.*"

"But," I objected, "why don't you write? It's the natural thing to do."

"Write? *Bah!* Did you ever hear of a Provençal writing when he could talk?" He tapped his lips, and in an instant, like a whirlwind, he passed from my ken.

Aristide on his arrival at Chislehurst looked about the pleasant, leafy place—it was a bright October afternoon and the wooded hillside blazed in russet and gold—and decided it was the perfect environment for Miss Janet and Miss Anne, to say nothing of little Jean. A neat red brick house with a trim garden in front of it looked just the kind of a house wherein Miss Janet and Miss Anne would live. He rang the bell. A parlour-maid, in spotless black and white, tutelary

nymph of Suburbia, the very parlour-maid who would minister to Miss Janet and Miss Anne, opened the door.

"Miss Honeywood?" he inquired.

"Not here, sir," said the parlour-maid.

"Where is she? I mean, where are they?"

"No one of that name lives here," said the parlour-maid.

"Who does live here?"

"Colonel Brabazon."

"And where do the two Miss Honeywood live?" he asked with his engaging smile.

But English suburban parlour-maids are on their guard against smiles, no matter how engaging. She prepared to shut the door.

"I don't know."

"How can I find out?"

"You might enquire among the tradespeople."

"Thank you, mademoiselle, you are a most intelligent young ——"

The door shut in his face. Aristide frowned. She was a pretty parlour-maid, and Aristide didn't like to be so haughtily treated by a pretty woman. But his quest being little Jean and not the eternal feminine, he took the maid's advice and made enquiries at the prim and respectable shops.

"Oh, yes," said a comely young woman in a fragrant bakers' and confectioners'. "They were two ladies, weren't they? They lived at Hope Cottage.

We used to supply them. They left Chislehurst two years ago."

"*Sacré nom d'un chien!*" said Aristide.

"Beg pardon?" asked the young woman.

"I am disappointed," said Aristide. "Where did they go to?"

"I'm sure I can't tell you."

"Do you remember whether they had a baby?"

"They were maiden ladies," said the young woman rebukingly.

"But anybody can keep a baby without being its father or mother. I want to know what has become of the baby."

The young woman gazed through the window.

"You had better ask the policeman."

"That's an idea," said Aristide, and, leaving her, he caught up the passing constable.

The constable knew nothing of maiden ladies with a baby, but he directed him to Hope Cottage. He found a pretty half-timber house lying back from the road, with a neat semi-circular gravelled path leading to a porch covered thick with Virginia creeper. Even more than the red brick residence of Colonel Bfabazon did it look, with its air of dainty comfort, the fitting abode of Miss Janet and Miss Anne. He rang the bell and interviewed another trim parlour-maid. More susceptible to smiles than the former, she summoned her master, a kindly, middle-aged man, who came out into the

porch. Yes, Honeywood was the name of the previous tenants. Two ladies, he believed. He had never seen them and knew nothing about a child. Messrs. Tompkin & Briggs, the estate agents in the High Street, could no doubt give him information. Aristide thanked him and made his way to Messrs. Tompkin & Briggs. A dreary spectacled youth in resentful charge of the office—his principals, it being Saturday afternoon, were golfing the happy hours away—professed blank ignorance of everything. Aristide fixed him with his glittering eye and flickered his fingers and spoke richly. The youth in a kind of mesmeric trance took down a battered, dog's eared book and turned over the pages.

"Honeywood—Miss—Beverly Stoke—near St. Albans—Herts. That's it," he said.

Aristide made a note of the address. "Is that all you can tell me?"

"Yes," said the youth.

"I thank you very much, my young friend," said Aristide, raising his hat, "and here is something to buy a smile with," and, leaving a sixpence on the table to shimmer before the youth's stupefied eyes, Aristide strutted out of the office.

"You had much better have written," said I, when he came back and told me of his experiences. "The post-office would have done all that for you."

"You have no idea of business, *mon cher ami*"—(I—a successful tea-broker of twenty-five years' standing!—the impudence of the fellow!)—"If I had written to-day, the letter would have reached Chislehurst on Monday morning. It would be re-directed and reach Hertfordshire on Tuesday. I should not get any news till Wednesday. I go down to Beverly Stoke to-morrow, and then I find at once Miss Janet and Miss Anne and my little Jean! The secret of business men, and I am a business man, the accredited representative of Dulau et Compagnie—never forget that—the secret of business is no delay."

He darted across the room to Bradshaw.

"For God's sake," said I, "put that nightmare of perpetual motion in your pocket and go mad over it in the privacy of your own chamber."

"Very good," said he, tucking the brain-convulsing volume under his arm. "I will put it on top of The Times and the family Bible and I will say 'Ha! now I am British. Now I am very respectable!' What else can I do?"

"Rent a pew in a Baptist chapel," said I.

After a three-mile trudge from St. Albans Aristide, following directions, found himself on a high road running through the middle of a straggy common decked here and there with great elms splendid in autumn bravery, and populated chiefly by

geese, who when he halted in some perplexity—for on each side, beyond the green, were indications of a human settlement—advanced in waddling flocks towards him and signified their disapproval of his presence. A Sundayfied youth in a rainbow tie rode past on a bicycle. Aristide took off his hat. The youth nearly fell off the bicycle, but British doggedness saved him from disaster.

"Beverly Stoke? Will you have the courtesy——"

"Here," bawled the youth, with a circular twist of his head, and, eager to escape from a madman, he rode on furiously.

Aristide looked to left and right at the little houses beyond the green—some white and thatched and dilapidated, others horridly new and perky—but all poor and insignificant. As his eyes became accustomed to the scene they were aware of human forms dotted sparsely about the common. He struck across and accosted one, an elderly woman with a prayer-book. "Miss Honeywood? A lady from London?"

"That house over there—the third beyond the poplar."

"And little Jean—a beautiful child about four years old?"

"That I don't know, sir. I live at Wilmer's End, a good half mile from here."

Aristide made for the third house past the poplar. First there was a plank bridge across a grass-

grown ditch; then a tiny patch of garden; then a humble whitewashed cottage with a small leaded casement window on each side of the front door. Unlike Hope Cottage, it did not look at all the residence of Miss Janet and Miss Anne. Its appearance, indeed, was woe-begone. Aristide, however, went up to the door; as there was neither knocker nor bell, he rapped with his knuckles. The door opened, and there, poorly dressed in blouse and skirt, stood Miss Anne.

She regarded him for a moment in a bewildered way, then, recognizing him, drew back into the stone flagged passage with a sharp cry.

"You? You—Mr. Pujol?"

"*Oui, Mademoiselle, c'est moi.* It is I, Aristide Pujol."

She put her hands on her bosom. "It is rather a shock seeing you—so unexpectedly. Will you come in?"

She led the way into a tiny parlour, very clean, very simple with its furniture of old oak and brass, and bade him sit. She looked a little older than when he had seen her at Aix-en-Provence. A few lines had marred the comely face and there was here and there a touch of grey in the reddish hair, and, though still buxom, she had grown thinner. Care had set its stamp upon her.

"Miss Honeywood," said Aristide. "It is on account of little Jean that I have come——"

She turned on him swiftly. "Not to take him away!"

"Then he is here!" He jumped to his feet and wrung both her hands and kissed them to her great embarrassment. "Ah, mademoiselle, I knew it. I felt it. When such an inspiration comes to a man, it is the *bon Dieu* who sends it. He is here, actually here, in this house?"

"Yes," said Miss Anne.

Aristide threw out his arms. "Let me see him. *Ah, le cher petit!* I have been yearning after him for three years. It was my heart that I ripped out of my body that night and laid at your threshold."

"Hush!" said Miss Anne, with an interrupting gesture. "You must not talk so loud. He is asleep in the next room. You mustn't wake him. He is very ill."

"Ill? Dangerously ill?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Mon Dieu," said he, sitting down again in the oak settle. To Aristide the emotion of the moment was absorbing, overwhelming. His attitude betokened deepest misery and dejection.

"And I expected to see him full of joy and health!"

"It is not my fault, Mr. Pujol," said Miss Anne.

He started. "But no. How could it be? You loved him when you first set eyes on him at Aix-en-Provence."

Miss Anne began to cry. "God knows," said she, "what I should do without him. The dear mite is all that is left to me."

"All? But there is your sister, the dear Miss Janet."

Miss Anne's eyes were hidden in her handkerchief. "My poor sister died last year, Mr. Pujol."

"I am very sorry. I did not know," said Aristide gently.

There was a short silence. "It was a great sorrow to you," he said.

"It was God's will," said Anne. Then, after another pause, during which she dried her eyes, she strove to smile. "Tell me about yourself. How do you come to be here?"

Aristide replied in a hesitating way. He was in the presence of grief and sickness and trouble; the Provençal braggadocio dropped from him and he became the simple and childish creature that he was. He accounted very truthfully, very convincingly, for his queer life; for his abandonment of little Jean, for his silence, for his sudden and unexpected appearance. During the ingenuous *apologia pro vita sua* Miss Anne regarded him with her honest candour.

"Janet and I both understood," she said. "Janet was gifted with a divine comprehension and pity. The landlady at the hotel, I remember, said some unkind things about you; but we didn't believe them. We

felt that you were a good man—no one but a good man could have written that letter—we cried over it—and when she tried to poison our minds we said to each other: 'What does it matter? Here God in his mercy has given us a child.' But, Mr. Pujol, why didn't you take us into your confidence?"

"My dear Miss Anne," said Aristide, "we of the South do things impulsively, by lightning flashes. An idea comes suddenly. *Vlan!* we carry it out in two seconds. We are not less human than the Northerner, who reflects two months."

"That is almost what dear, wise Janet told me," said Miss Anne.

"Then you know in your heart," said Aristide, after a while, "that if I had not been only a football at the feet of fortune, I should never have deserted little Jean?"

"I do, Mr. Pujol. My sister and I have been footballs, too." She added with a change of tone: "You tell me you saw our dear home at Chislehurst?"

"Yes," said Aristide.

"And you see this. There is a difference."

"What has happened?" asked Aristide.

She told him the commonplace pathetic story. Their father had left them shares in the company of which he had been managing director. For many years they had enjoyed a comfortable income. Then the company had become bankrupt and

only a miserable ninety pounds a year had been saved from the wreckage. The cottage at Beverly Stoke belonging to them—it had been their mother's—they had migrated thither with their fallen fortunes and little Jean. And then Janet had died. She was delicate and unaccustomed to privation and discomfort—and the cottage had its disadvantages. She, Anne herself, was as strong as a horse and had never been ill in her life, but others were not quite so hardy. "However"—she smiled—"one has to make the best of things."

"Parbleu," said Aristide.

Miss Anne went on to talk of Jean, a miraculous infant of infinite graces and accomplishments. Up to now he had been the sturdiest and merriest fellow.

"At nine months old he saw that life was a big joke," said Aristide. "How he used to laugh."

"There's not much laugh left in him, poor darling," she sighed. And she told how he had caught a chill which had gone to his lungs and how the night before last she thought she had lost him.

She sat up and listened. "Will you excuse me for a moment?"

She went out and presently returned, standing at the doorway. "He is still asleep. Would you like to see him? Only"—she put her fingers on her lips—"you must be very, very quiet."

He followed her into the next room and looked

about him shyly, recognizing that it was Miss Anne's own bedroom; and there, lying in a little cot beside the big bed, he saw the sleeping child, his brown face flushed with fever. He had a curly shock of black hair and well formed features. An old woolly lamb nose to nose with him shared his pillow. Aristide drew from his pocket a Teddy bear, and, having asked Miss Anne's permission with a glance, laid it down gently on the coverlid.

His eyes were wet when they returned to the parlour. So were Miss Anne's. The Teddy bear was proof of the simplicity of his faith in her.

After a while, conscious of hunger, he rose to take leave. He must be getting back to St. Albans. But might he be permitted to come back later in the afternoon? Miss Anne reddened. It outraged her sense of hospitality to send a guest away from her house on a three-mile walk for food. And yet——

"Mr. Pujol," she said bravely, "I would ask you to stay to luncheon if I had anything to offer you. But I am single handed, and, with Jean's illness, I haven't given much thought to housekeeping. The woman who does some of the rough work won't be back till six. I hate to let you go all those miles —I am so distressed——"

"But, mademoiselle," said Aristide. "You have some bread. You have water. It has been a ban-

quet many a day to me, and this time it would be the most precious banquet of all."

"I can do a little better than that," faltered Miss Anne. "I have plenty of eggs and there is bacon."

"Eggs—bacon!" cried Aristide, his bright eyes twinkling and his hands going up in the familiar gesture. "That is superb. *Tiens!* you shall not do the cooking. You shall rest. I will make you an *omelette au lard—ah!*"—he kissed the tips of his fingers—"such an omelette as you have not eaten since you were in France—and even there I doubt whether you have ever eaten an omelette like mine." His soul simmering with omelette, he darted towards the door. "The kitchen—it is this way?"

"But, Mr. Pujol——!" Miss Anne laughed, protestingly. Who could be angry with the vivid and impulsive creature?

"It is the room opposite Jean's—not so?"

She followed him into the clean little kitchen, half amused, half flustered. Already he had hooked off the top of the kitchen range. "Ah! a good fire. And your frying-pan?" He dived into the scullery.

"Please don't be in such a hurry," she pleaded. "You will have made the omelette before I've had time to lay the cloth, and it will get cold. Besides, I want to learn how to do it."

"*Trés bien,*" said Aristide, laying down the frying-pan. "You shall see how it is made—the omelette of the universe."

So he helped Miss Anne to lay the cloth on the gate-legged oak table in the parlour and to set it out with bread and butter and the end of a tinned tongue and a couple of bottles of stout. After which they went back to the little kitchen, where in a kind of giggling awe she watched him shred the bacon and break the eggs with his thin, skilful fingers and perform his magic with the frying-pan and turn out the great golden creation into the dish.

"Now," said he, pulling her in his enthusiasm, "to table while it is hot."

Miss Anne laughed. She lost her head ever so little. The days had been drab and hopeless of late and she was still young; so, if she felt excited at this unhoped for inrush of life and colour, who shall blame her? The light sparkled once more in her eyes and the pink of her naturally florid complexion shone on her cheek as they sat down to table.

"It is I who help it," said Aristide. "Taste that." He passed the plate and waited, with the artist's expectation for her approval.

"It's delicious."

It was indeed the perfection of omelette, all its suave juiciness contained in film as fine as gold-beater's skin.

"Yes, it's good." He was delighted, childlike, at the success of his cookery. His gaiety kept the

careworn woman in rare laughter during the meal. She lost all consciousness that he was a strange man plunged down suddenly in the midst of her old maidish existence—and a strange man, too, who had once behaved in a most outrageous fashion. But that was ever the way of Aristide. The moment you yielded to his attraction he made you feel that you had known him for years. His fascination possessed you.

"Miss Anne," said he, smoking a cigarette, at her urgent invitation, "is there a poor woman in Beverly Stoke with whom I could lodge?"

She gasped. "You lodge in Beverly Stoke?"

"Why yes," said Aristide, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "I am engaged in the city from ten to five every day. I can't come here and go back to London every night, and I can't stay a whole week without my little Jean. And I have my duty to Jean. I stand to him in the relation of a father. I must help you to nurse him and make him better. I must give him soup and apples and ice cream and——"

"You would kill the darling in five minutes," interrupted Miss Anne.

He waved his forefinger in the air. "No, no, I have nursed the sick in my time. My dear friend," said he, with a change of tone, "when did you go to bed last?"

"I don't know," she answered in some confusion.

"The district nurse has helped me—and the doctor has been very good. Jean has turned the corner now. Please don't worry. And as for your coming to live down here, it's absurd."

"Of course, if you formally forbid me to do so, mademoiselle, and if you don't want to see me——"

"How can you say a thing like that? Haven't I shown you to-day that you are welcome?"

"Dear Miss Anne," said he, "forgive me. But what is that great vast town of London to me who know nobody there? Here in this tiny spot is concentrated all I care for in the world. Why shouldn't I live in it?"

"You would be so dreadfully uncomfortable," said Miss Anne, weakly.

"Bah!" cried Aristide. "You talk of discomfort to an old client of *L'Hôtel de la Belle Étoile?*"

"The Hotel of the Beautiful Star? Where is that?" asked the innocent lady.

"Wherever you like," said Aristide. "Your bed is dry leaves and your bed-curtains, if you demand luxury, are a hedge, and your ceiling, if you are fortunate, is ornamented with stars."

She looked at him wide-eyed, in great concern.

"Do you mean that you have ever been homeless?"

He laughed. "I think I've been everything imaginable, except married."

"Hush!" she said. "Listen!" Her keen ear had caught a child's cry. "It's Jean. I must go."

She hurried out. Aristide prepared to light another cigarette. But a second before the application of the flaring match an idea struck him. He blew out the match, replaced the cigarette in his case, and with a dexterity that revealed the professional of years ago, began to clear the table. He took the things noiselessly into the kitchen, shut the door, and master of the kitchen and scullery washed up. Then, the most care-free creature in the world, he stole down the stone passage into the wilderness of Beverly Stoke.

An hour afterwards he knocked at the front door. Anne Honeywood admitted him.

"I have arranged with the good Mrs. Buttershaw. She lives a hundred yards down the road. I bring my baggage to-morrow evening."

Anne regarded him in a humorous, helpless way. "I can't prevent you," she said, "but I can give you a piece of advice."

"What is it?"

"Don't wash up for Mrs. Buttershaw."

So it came to pass that Aristide Pujol took up his residence at Beverly Stoke, trudging every morning three miles to catch his business train at St. Albans, and trudging back every evening three miles to Beverly Stoke. Every morning he ran into the cottage for a sight of little Jean and every evening after a digestion-racking meal prepared by

Mrs. Buttershaw he went to the cottage armed with toys and weird and injudicious food for little Jean and demanded an account of the precious infant's doings during the day. Gradually Jean recovered of his congestion, being a sturdy urchin, and, to Aristide's delight, resumed the normal life of childhood.

"*Moi, je suis papa,*" said Aristide. "He has got to speak French, and he had better begin at once. It is absurd that anyone born between Salon and Arles should not speak French and Provençal; we'll leave Provençal till later. *Moi, je suis papa, Jean.* Say *papa.*"

"I don't quite see how he can call you that, Mr. Pujol," said Anne, with the suspicion of a flush on her cheek.

"And why not? Has the poor child any other papa in the whole wide world? And at four years old not to have a father is heart-breaking. Do you want us to bring him up an orphan? No. You shan't be an orphan, *mon brave,*" he continued, bending over the child and putting his little hands against his bearded face, "you couldn't bear such a calamity, could you? And so you will call me *papa.*"

"*Papa,*" said Jean, with a grin.

"There, he has settled it," said Aristide. "*Moi je suis papa.* And you, mademoiselle?"

"I am Auntie Anne," she replied demurely.

Saturday afternoons and Sundays were Aristide's days of delight. He could devote himself entirely to Jean. The thrill of the weeks when he had paraded the child in the market places of France while he sold his corn cure again ran through his veins. The two rows of cottages separated by the common, which was the whole of Beverly Stoke, became too small a theatre for his parental pride. He bewailed the loss of his automobile that had perished of senile decay at Aix-en-Provence. If he only had it now he could exhibit Jean to the astonished eyes of St. Albans, Watford—nay London itself!

"I wish I could take him to Dulau & Company," said he.

"Good Heavens!" cried Miss Anne in alarm, for Aristide was capable of everything. "What in the world would you do with him there?"

"What would I do with him?" replied Aristide, picking the child up in his arms—the three were strolling on the common—"*Parbleu!* I would use him to strike the staff of Dulau & Company green with envy. Do you think the united efforts of the whole lot of them, from the good Mr. Blessington to the office boy, could produce a hero like this? You are a hero, Jean, aren't you?"

"Yes, papa," said Jean.

"He knows it," shouted Aristide with a delighted gesture which nearly cast Jean to the circumambient

geese. "Miss Anne, we have the most wonderful child in the universe."

This, as far as Anne was concerned, was a proposition which for the past three years she had regarded as incontrovertible. She smiled at Aristide, who smiled at her, and Jean, seeing them happy, smiled largely at them both.

In a very short time Aristide, who could magically manufacture boats and cocks and pigs and giraffes out of bits of paper, who could bark like a dog and quack like a goose, who could turn himself into a horse or a bear at a minute's notice, whose pockets were a perennial mine of infantile ecstasy, established himself in Jean's mind as a kind of tame, necessary and beloved jinn. Being a loyal little soul, the child retained his affection for Auntie Anne, but he was swept off his little feet by his mirific parent. The time came when, if he was not dressed in his tiny woollen jersey and knee breeches and had not his nose glued against the parlour window in readiness to scramble to the front door for Aristide's morning kiss, he would have thought that chaos had come again. And Anne, humouring the child, hastened to get him washed and dressed in time; until at last, so greatly was she affected by his obsession, she got into the foolish habit of watching the clock and saying to herself: "In another minute he will be here," or:

"He is a minute late. What can have happened to him?"

So Aristide, in his child-like way, found remarkable happiness in Beverly Stoke. A very wet summer had been followed by a dry and mellow autumn. Aristide waxed enthusiastic over the English climate and rejoiced in the mild country air. He was also happy under my friend Blessington, who spoke of him to me in glowing terms. At the back of all Aristide's eccentricities was the Provençal peasant's shrewdness. He realized that, for the first time in his life, he had taken up a sound and serious avocation. Also, he was no longer irresponsible. He had found little Jean. Jean's future was in his hands. Jean was to be an architect—God knows why—but Aristide settled it, definitely, off-hand. He would have to be educated. "And, my dear friend," said he, when we were discussing Jean—and for months I heard nothing but Jean, Jean, Jean, so that I loathed the brat, until I met the brown-skinned, black-eyed, merry little wretch and fell, like everybody else, fatuously in love with him —"my dear friend," said he, "an architect, to be the architect that I mean him to be, must have universal knowledge. He must know the first word of the classic, the last word of the modern. He must be steeped in poetry, his brain must vibrate with science. He must be what you call in England a gentleman. He must go to one of your great

public schools—Eton, Winchester, Rugby, Harrow —you see I know them all—he must go to Cambridge or Oxford. Ah, I tell you, he is to be a big man. I, Aristide Pujol, did not pick him up on that deserted road, in the Arabia Petrea of Provence, between Salon and Arles, for nothing. He was wrapped, as I have told you, in an old blanket—and *ma foi* it smelt bad—and I dressed him in my pyjamas and made a Neapolitan cap for him out of one of my socks. The *bon Dieu* sent him, and I shall arrange just as the *bon Dieu* intended. Poor Miss Anne Honeywood with her ninety pounds a year, what can she do? Pouf! It is for me to look after the future of little Jean."

By means of such discourse he convinced Miss Anne that Jean was predestined to greatness and that Providence had appointed him, Aristide, as the child's agent in advance. Very much bewildered by his riotous flow of language and very reluctant to sacrifice her woman's pride, she agreed to allow him to contribute towards Jean's upbringing.

"Dear Miss Anne," said he, "it is my right. It is Jean's right. You would love to put him on top of the pinnacle of fame, would you not?"

"Of course," said Miss Anne.

"*Eh bien!* we will work together. You will give him what can be given by a beautiful and exquisite woman, and I will do all that can be done by the

accredited agent of Dulau et Compagnie, Wine Shippers of Bordeaux."

So, I repeat, Aristide was entirely happy. His waking dreams were of the four-year-old child. The glad anticipation of the working day in Great Tower St., E. C., was the evening welcome from the simple but capable gentlewoman and the sense of home and intimacy in her little parlour no bigger than the never-entered and nerve-destroying salon of his parents at Aigues Mortes, but smiling with the grace of old oak and faded chintz. At Aigues Mortes the salon was a comfortless, tasteless convention, set apart for the celebrations of baptisms and marriages and deaths, a pride and a terror to the inhabitants. But here everything seemed to be as much a warm bit of Anne Honeywood as the tortoise-shell comb in her hair and the square of Brussels lace that rose and fell on the bosom of her old evening frock. For, you see, since she expected a visitor in the evenings, Anne had taken to dressing for her sketch of a dinner. For all her struggle with poverty she had retained the charm that four years before had made her touch upon Jean seem a consecration to the impressionable man. And now that he entered more deeply into her life and thoughts, he found himself in fragrant places that were very strange to him. He discovered, too, with some surprise, that a man who has been at fierce grips with For-

tune all his life from ten to forty is ever so little tired in spirit and is glad to rest. In the tranquility of Anne Honeywood's presence his soul was singularly at peace. He also wondered why Anne Honeywood seemed to grow younger, and, in her gentle fashion, more laughter-loving, every day.

The Saint Martin's summer lasted to the beginning of December, and then it came to an end, and with it the idyll of Aristide and Anne Honeywood.

One Saturday afternoon, when the rain was falling dismally, she received him with an embarrassment she could scarcely conceal. The usual heightened colour no longer gave youth to her cheek; an anxious frown knitted her candid brows; and there was no laughter in her eyes. He looked at her questioningly. Was anything the matter with Jean? But Jean answered the question for himself by running down the passage and springing like a puppy into Aristide's arms. Anne turned her face away, as if the sight pained her, and, pleading a headache and the desire to lie down, she left the two together. Returning after a couple of hours with the tea-tray, she found them on the floor breathlessly absorbed in the erection of card pagodas. She bit her lip and swallowed a sob. Aristide jumped up and took the tray. Was not the headache better? He was so grieved. Jean must be very quiet and drink up his milk quietly like a hero because Auntie was suffering. Tea was a very subdued affair. Then

Anne carried off Jean to bed, refusing Aristide's helpful ministrations. It was his Saturday and Sunday joy to bath Jean amid a score of crawly tin insects which he had provided for the child's ablutionary entertainment, and it formed the climax of Jean's blissful day. But this afternoon Anne tore the twain asunder. Aristide looked mournfully over the rain-swept common through the leaded panes, and speculated on the enigma of woman. A man, feeling ill, would have been only too glad for somebody to do his work; but a woman, just because she was ill, declined assistance. Surely women were an intellect-baffling sex.

She came back, having put Jean to bed.

"My dear friend," she said, with a blurt of bravery, "I have something very hard to say, but I must say it. You must go away from Beverly Stoke."

"Ah!" cried Aristide, "is it I, then, that give you a headache?"

"It's not your fault," she said gently. "You have been everything that a loyal gentleman could be—and it's because you're a loyal gentleman that you must go."

"I don't understand," said he, puzzled. "I must go away because I give you a headache, although it is not my fault."

"It's nothing to do with headaches," she explained. "Don't you see? People around here are talking."

"About you and me?"

"Yes," said Miss Anne, faintly.

"Saprelotte!" cried Aristide, with a fine flourish, "let them talk!"

"Against Jean and myself?"

The reproach brought him to his feet. "No," said he. "No. Sooner than they should talk, I would go out and strangle every one of them. But it is infamous. What do they say?"

"How can I tell you? What would they say in your own country?"

"France is France and England is England."

"And a little cackling village is the same all the world over. No, my dear friend—for you are my dear friend—you must go back to London, for the sake of my good name and Jean's."

"But let us leave the cackling village."

"There are geese on every common," said Anne.

"Nom de Dieu!" muttered Aristide, walking about the tiny parlour. *"Nom de Dieu de nom de Dieu!"* He stood in front of her and flung out his arms wide. "But without Jean and you life will have no meaning for me. I shall die. I shall fade away. I shall perish. Tell me, dear Miss Anne, what they are saying, the miserable peasants with souls of mud."

But Anne could tell him no more. It had been hateful and degrading to tell him so much. She shivered through all her purity. After a barren

discussion she held out her hand, large and generous like herself.

"Good-bye"—she hesitated for the fraction of a second—"Good-bye, Aristide. I promise you shall provide for Jean's future. I will bring him up to London now and then to see you. We will find some way out of the difficulty. But you see, don't you, that you must leave Beverly Stoke?"

Aristide went back to his comfortless lodgings aflame with bewilderment, indignation and despair. He fell upon Mrs. Buttershaw, a slatternly and sour-visaged woman, and hurled at her a tornado of questions. She responded with the glee of a hag, and Aristide learned the amazing fact that in the matter of sheer uncharitableness, unkindness and foulness of thought Beverly Stoke, with its population of three hundred hinds, could have brought down upon it the righteous indignation of Sodom, Gomorrah, Babylon, Paris, and London. For a fortnight or so Anne Honeywood's life in the village had been that of a pariah dog.

"And now you've spoke of it yourself," said Mrs. Buttershaw, her hands on her hips, "I'm glad. I'm a respectable woman, I am, and go to church regularly, and I don't want to be mixed up in such goings on. And I never have held with foreigners, anyway. And the sooner you find other lodgings, the better."

For the first and only time in his life words

failed Aristide Pujol. He stood in front of the virtuous harridan, his lips working, his fingers convulsively clutching the air.

"You—you—you—you naughty woman!" he gasped, and, sweeping her away from the doorway of his box of a sitting-room, he rushed up to his tinier bedroom and in furious haste packed his portmanteau.

"I would rather die than sleep another night beneath your slanderous roof," he cried at the foot of the stairs. "Here is more than your week's money." He flung a couple of gold coins on the floor and dashed out into the darkness and the rain.

He hammered at Anne Honeywood's door. She opened it in some alarm.

"You?—but——" she stammered.

"I have come," said he, dumping his portmanteau in the passage, "to take you and Jean away from this abomination of a place. It is a Tophet reserved for those who are not good enough for hell. In hell there is dignity, *que diable!* Here there is none. I know what you have suffered. I know how they insult you. I know what they say. You cannot stay one more night here. Pack up all your things. Pack up all Jean's things. I have my valise here. I walk to St. Albans and I come back for you in an automobile. You lock up the door. I tell the policeman to guard the cottage. You come with me. We take a train to London. You and Jean will stay at

a hotel. I will go to my good friend who saved me from Madam Gougasse. After that we will think."

"That's just like you," she said, smiling in spite of her trouble, "you act first and think afterwards. Unfortunately I'm in the habit of doing the reverse."

"But it's I who am doing all the thinking for you. I have thought till my brain is red hot." He laughed in his luminous and excited way, and, seizing both her hands, kissed them one after the other. "There!" said he, "be ready by the time I return. Do not hesitate. Do not look back. Remember Lot's wife!" He flourished his hat and was gone like a flash into the heavy rain and darkness of the December evening. Anne cried after him, but he too remembering Lot's wife would not turn. He marched on buoyantly, heedless of the wet and the squirting mud from unseen puddles. It was an adventure such as he loved. It was a knightly errand, *parbleu!* Was he not delivering a beautiful lady from the dragon of calumny? And in an automobile, too! His imagination fondled the idea.

At a garage in St. Albans he readily found a car for hire. He was all for driving it himself—that is how he had pictured the rescue—but the proprietor, dull and unimaginative tradesman, declined firmly. It was a hireling who drove the car to Beverly

Stoke. Anne, unhatted and uncloaked, admitted him.

"You are not ready?"

"My dear friend, how can I——?"

"You are not coming?" His hands dropped to his sides and his face was the incarnation of disappointment.

"Let us talk things over reasonably," she urged, opening the parlour door.

"But I have brought the automobile."

"He can wait for five minutes, can't he?"

"He can wait till Doomsday," said Aristide.

"Take off your dripping coat. You must be wet through. Oh, how impulsive you are!"

He took off his overcoat dejectedly and followed her into the parlour, where she tried to point out the impossibility of his scheme. How could she abandon her home at a moment's notice? Failing to convince him, she said at last in some embarrassment, but with gentle dignity: "Suppose we did run away together in your romantic fashion, would it not confirm the scandal in the eyes of this wretched village?"

"You are right," said Aristide. "I had not thought of it."

He knew himself to be a madman. It was not thus that ladies were rescued from calumny. But to leave her alone to face it for time indefinite was unthinkable. And, meanwhile, what would become

of him severed from her and little Jean? He sighed and looked around the little room where he had been so happy, and at the sweet-faced woman whose companionship had been so dear to him. And then the true meaning of all the precious things that had been his life for the past two months appeared before him like a smiling valley hitherto hidden and now revealed by dissolving mist. A great gladness gathered round his heart. He leaned across the table by which he was sitting and looked at her and for the first time noticed that her eyes were red.

"You have been crying, dear Anne," said he, using her name boldly. "Why?"

A man ought not to put a question like that at a woman's head and bid her stand and deliver. How is she to answer? Anne felt Aristide's bright eyes upon her and the colour mounted and mounted and deepened on her cheeks and brow.

"I don't like changes," she said in a low voice.

Aristide slipped noiselessly to the side of her chair and knelt on one knee and took her hand.

"Anne—my beloved Anne!" said he.

And Anne neither moved nor protested, but looked away from him into the fire.

And that is all that Aristide told me. There are sacred and beautiful things in life that one man does not tell to another. He did, however, mention that they forgot all about the unfortunate chauffeur sit-

ting in the rain till about three hours afterwards, when Aristide sped away to a St. Albans hotel in joyous solitude.

The very next day he burst in upon me in a state of bliss bordering on mania.

"But there is a tragic side to it," he said when the story was over. "For half the year I shall be exiled to Bordeaux, Marseilles and Algiers as the representative of Dulau et Compagnie."

"The very best thing that could happen for your domestic happiness," said I.

"What? With my heart"—he thumped his heart —"with my heart hurting like the devil all the time?"

"So long as your heart hurts," said I, "you know it isn't dead."

A short while afterwards they were married in London. I was best man and Jean, specklessly attired, was page of honour, and the vicar of her own church at Chislehurst performed the ceremony. The most myopic of creatures could have seen that Anne was foolishly in love with her rascal husband. How could she help it?

As soon as the newly wedded pair had received the exhortation, Aristide, darting to the altar-rail, caught Jean up in his arms, and, to the consternation of the officiating clergy, the verger, and Anne's conventional friends, cried out exultingly:

"*Ah, mon petit.* It was a lucky day for both of

us when I picked you up on the road between Salon and Arles. Put your hands together as you do when you're saying your prayers, *mon brave*, and say, 'God bless father and mother.' "

Jean obediently adopted the attitude of the infant Samuel in the pictures.

"God bless father and mother," said he, and the childish treble rang out queerly in the large, almost empty church.

There was a span of silence and then all the women-folk fell on little Jean and that was the end of that wedding.

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